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WORDS AND
MEANINGS

A **word** is the basic stuff of language. Sounds and letters are the way words are expressed, and grammar is the way words are arranged. Thus language is centrally words. Linguists tend to prefer the study of sounds (phonology) and grammar (morphosyntax) over words (lexis) because those first two have comparatively strict regularities that can be described as more or less fixed “laws” or “rules.” And linguists love laws. $\&$ language regularity is fuzzy, variable, and only imperfectly predictable, unlike good human laws and all natural laws. So the lack of strictness in our vocabulary is not an aberration but is really typical of language.

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure famously compared the rules of language to those of chess. But the American linguist Charles Hockett responded that they are more like the rules of sandlot baseball—they are whatever one player can persuade other players to accept, so they are uncertain and constantly changing. Hockett was right. Language is the usage of people who speak the language. The “rules” of language are descriptions of what people tend to do; they are not prescriptions from outside the language that people have to follow.

English has an extraordinarily large vocabulary, much larger than that of many other languages, because of its extensive contacts with other languages, because of the large numbers of people all over the world who have come to use it, and because of the increasingly manifold purposes for which it is used. It is hardly surprising that the large English vocabulary includes words most of us have little occasion to use and may not recognize at all. $\&$ u have undoubtedly encountered some such words already in the course of reading this book. But here are a few others that are unfamiliar to many speakers of English: *aglet*, *blatherskite*, *crepuscule*, *dottle*, *eidolon*, *felly*, *gudgeon*, *hajji*, *incunabulum*, *jerrican*, *kyphotic*, *latitudinarian*, *maculate*, *navicular*, *osculate*, *pyx*, *quidnunc*, *recuse*, *swarf*, *toque*, *usufruct*, *vexillology*, *warison*, *Xanthippe*, *yashmak*, *zori*. If you know at least seven of those words (all of which are in a good desk dictionary), you are an eruditionally nonpareil polymath. If you know half of them, you should have written this book instead of its author.

Moreover, the English word stock is constantly growing. A *New York Times* article by Grant Barrett recorded his list of words of \emptyset many of which were

older but were prominent during that year. They included *astronaut diaper* ‘a garment worn by pressure-suited astronauts’; *bacn* ‘spamlike e-mail messages that the receiver has chosen to receive (alerts, newsletters, automated reminders, etc.)’; *boot camp flu* ‘a virus among military recruits, who live in close quarters under stressful conditions’; *colony collapse disorder* ‘a disease killing pollinating bees nationwide, so threatening agriculture’; *earmarxist* ‘a member of Congress who adds earmarks—money designated for pet projects—to legislation’; *exploding ARM* ‘an adjustable rate mortgage whose rates rise beyond a borrower’s ability to pay’; *forever stamp* ‘a postage stamp for first-class mail regardless of future price increases’; *global weirding* ‘freakish weather and animal migration patterns attributed to global warming’; *gorno* (from *gore* + *porno*) ‘a genre of movies’; *to life-stream* ‘to record one’s life in video, sound, pictures, and print’; *maternal profiling* ‘employment discrimination against a woman who has, or will have, children’; *mobisode* ‘a short version of a full-length television show or movie for playing on a mobile phone or other hand-held electronic device’; *Ninja loan* (from *No Income, No Job or Assets*) ‘a poorly documented loan made to a high-risk borrower’; *to pap* ‘to take paparazzi-style photographs’; *-shed* (from *watershed*), as in *foodshed* ‘the area sufficient to provide food for a given location,’ *viewshed* ‘the landscape or topography visible from a given geographic point,’ and *walkshed* ‘the area conveniently reached on foot from a given geographic point’; and *tumblelog* ‘a Web site or blog that is a collection of brief links to, quotes from, or comments about other Web sites.’ Few, if any, of these will long survive, but all are illustrative of the creativity of wordsmiths.

Many people find the study of words and their meanings interesting and colorful. Witness the many letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines—letters devoted to the uses and misuses of words, but usually misinformed. The misinformation is sometimes etymological in nature, like the old and oft-recurring wheeze that *sirloin* is so called because King Henry VIII (or James I or Charles II) liked a loin of beef so well that he knighted one, saying “Arise, Sir Loin” at the conferring of the accolade. In reality, the term comes from French *sur-* ‘over, above’ and *loin* and is thus a cut of meat from the top of the loin. It is likely, however, that the popular explanation of the knighting has influenced the modern spelling of the word.

Such fanciful tales appeal to our imagination and therefore are difficult to exorcise. The real history of words, however, is interesting enough to make unnecessary such fictions as that about the knighting of the steak. When the speakers of a language have need for a new word, they can make one up, borrow one from some other language, or adapt one of the words they already use by changing its meaning. The first two techniques for increasing the vocabulary will be the subjects of the next two chapters; the third will occupy our attention for the remainder of this one.

SEMANTICS AND CHANGE OF MEANING

The **meaning** of a word is what those who use it intend or understand that it represents. **Semantics** is the study of meaning in all of its aspects. The Whorf hypothesis, which was mentioned in Chapter 1, proposes that the way our language formulates meaning affects the way we respond to the world or even perceive it. On an ordinary level, language clearly influences our daily activities and habits of thought. Because two persons can be referred to by the same word—for example, *Irish*—we

assume that they must be alike in certain stereotyped ways. Thus we may unconsciously believe that all the Irish have red hair, drink too much, and are quarrelsome. **General Semantics**, a study founded by Alfred Korzybski, is an effort to pay attention to such traps that language sets for us (Hayakawa and Hayakawa). Our concern in this chapter, however, is not with such studies, but rather with the ways in which the meanings of words change over time to allow us to talk about new things or about old things in a new light.

VARIABLE AND VAGUE MEANINGS

The meanings of words vary with place, time, and situation. Thus the noun *tonic* may mean ‘soft drink made with carbonated water’ in parts of eastern New England, though elsewhere it usually means ‘liquid medicinal preparation to invigorate the system’ or, in the phrase *gin and tonic*, ‘quinine water.’ In the usage of musicians the same word may also mean the first tone of a musical scale. And some linguists use it to mean the syllable of maximum prominence in an intonational phrase.

A large number of educated speakers and writers, for whatever reason, object to *disinterested* in the sense ‘uninterested, unconcerned’—a sense it previously had but lost for a while—and want the word to have only the meaning ‘impartial, unprejudiced.’ The criticized use has nevertheless gained such ground that it has practically driven out the other one. That change causes no harm to language as communication. We have merely lost a synonym for *impartial* and gained one for *indifferent*.

Many words in frequent use, like *nice* and *democracy*, have meanings that are more or less subjective and hence vague. For instance, after seeing a well-dressed person take the arm of a blind and ragged person and escort that person across a crowded street, a sentimental man remarked, “That was true democracy.” It was, of course, ordinary human decency, as likely to occur in a monarchy or dictatorship as in a democracy. The semantic element of the word *democracy* in the speaker’s mind was ‘kindness to those less fortunate than oneself.’ He approved of such kindness, as we all do, and because he regarded both kindness and democracy as good, he equated the two.

Some words are generally used with very loose meanings, and we could not easily get along without such words—*nice*, for instance, as in “She’s a nice person” (meaning that she has been well brought up and is kind, gracious, and generally well-mannered), in contrast to “That’s a nice state of affairs” (meaning it is a perfectly awful state of affairs). There is certainly nothing wrong with expressing pleasure and appreciation to a hostess by a heartfelt “I’ve had a very nice [or even “awfully nice”] time.” To seek for a more “accurate” word, one of more precise meaning, would be self-conscious and affected. Vagueness is often useful.

ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING

The belief is widespread, even among some otherwise well-informed people, that what a word means today is what it meant in the past—preferably what it meant originally, if it were possible to discover that. Such belief is frequent for borrowed

words, the mistaken idea being that the meaning of the word in our English and the meaning of the foreign word from which the English word was derived must be, or at least ought to be, the same. An appeal to **etymology** to determine today's meaning of a word is as unreliable as an appeal to spelling to determine modern pronunciation. Change of meaning—**semantic change**—may, and frequently does, alter the so-called **etymological sense**, which may have become altogether obsolete. (The etymological sense is only the earliest sense we can *discover*, not necessarily the very earliest.) The study of etymologies is richly rewarding. It may, for instance, throw light on how a present-day meaning developed or reveal something about the working of the human mind, but it is of no help in determining for us what a word “actually” means today.

Certain popular writers, overeager to display their learning, have asserted that words are misused when they depart from their etymological meanings. Thus Ambrose Bierce in what he called a “blacklist of literary faults” declared that *dilapidated*, because of its ultimate derivation from Latin *lapis* ‘stone,’ could appropriately be used only of a stone structure. Such a notion, if true, would commit us to the parallel assertions that only what actually has roots can properly be eradicated, since *eradicate* is ultimately derived from Latin *radix* ‘root’; that *calculation* be restricted to counting pebbles (Latin *calx* ‘stone’); and that *sinister* be applied only to leftists and *dexterous* to rightists. By the same token we should have to insist that we could *admire* only what we could wonder at, inasmuch as the English word comes from Latin *ad* ‘at’ plus *mīrārī* ‘to wonder’—as indeed Hamlet so used it in “Season your admiration for a while / With an attent eare.” Or we might insist that *giddy* persons must be divinely inspired, inasmuch as *gid* is a derivative of *god* (*enthusiastic*, from Greek, also had this meaning), or that only men may be *virtuous*, because *virtue* is derived from Latin *virtus* ‘manliness,’ itself a derivative of *vir* ‘man.’ Now, alas for the wicked times in which we live, *virtue* is applied to few men and not many women. *Virile*, also a derivative of *vir*, has retained all of its earlier meaning and has even added to it.

From these few examples, it must be obvious that we cannot ascribe anything like “fixed” meanings to words. Meanings are variable and have often wandered far from what their etymologies suggest. To suppose that invariable meanings exist, quite apart from context, is to be guilty of a type of naïveté that vitiates clear thinking.

HOW MEANING CHANGES

Meaning is particularly likely to change in a field undergoing rapid expansion and development, such as computer technology. All of the following terms had earlier meanings that were changed when they were applied to computers: *bookmark*, *boot*, *floppy*, *mail*, *mouse*, *notebook*, *save*, *server*, *spam*, *surf*, *virtual*, *virus*, *wallpaper*, *web*, *window*, *zip*.

How such words change their meaning, though unpredictable, is not chaotic, but follows certain paths. First, it is necessary to distinguish between the **sense**—literal meaning or **denotation**—of an expression and its associations or **connotations**. *Father*, *dad*, and *the old man* may all refer to the same person, but the associations of the three expressions are likely to be different, as are those of other synonymous

terms like *dada*, *daddy*, *governor*, *pa*, *pappy*, *pater*, *poppa*, *pops*, and *sire*. Words change in both their senses and their associations. A sense may expand to include more referents than it formerly had (**generalization**), contract to include fewer referents (**specialization**), or shift to include a quite different set of referents (**transfer of meaning**). The associations of a word may become worse (**pejoration**) or better (**amelioration**) and stronger or weaker than they formerly were. Each of these possibilities is examined below.

GENERALIZATION AND SPECIALIZATION

One classification of meaning is based on the scope of things to which a word can apply. That is to say, meaning may be generalized (extended, widened), or it may be specialized (restricted, narrowed). When we increase the scope of a word, we reduce the number of features in its definition that restrict its application. For instance, *tail* in earlier times seems to have meant ‘hairy caudal appendage, as of a horse.’ When we eliminated the hairiness (or the horsiness) from the meaning, we increased its scope, so that in Modern English the word means simply ‘caudal appendage’ or more generally ‘the last part’ of anything.

Similarly, a *mill* was earlier a place for making things by the process of grinding, that is, for making meal. The words *meal* and *mill* are themselves related, as one might guess from their similarity. A mill is now, however, a place for making or processing things: the grinding has been eliminated, so that we may speak of a cotton mill, a steel mill, or even a gin mill. The word *corn* earlier meant ‘grain’ and is in fact related to the word *grain*. It is still used in this general sense in Britain, as in the “Corn Laws,” but specifically it may refer there to either oats (for animals) or wheat (for human beings). In American usage, *corn* denotes ‘maize,’ which is of course not at all what Keats meant in his “Ode to a Nightingale” when he described Ruth as standing “in tears amid the alien corn.”

The building in which corn, regardless of its meaning, is stored is called a barn. *Barn* earlier denoted a storehouse for barley; the word is, in fact, a compound of two Old English words, *bere* ‘barley’ and *ærn* ‘house.’ By eliminating the barley feature of its earlier sense, the scope of this word has been extended to mean a storehouse for any kind of grain. American English has still further generalized the term by eliminating the grain, so that *barn* may mean also a place for housing livestock or, more recently, a warehouse (a truck barn), a building for sales (an antique barn), or merely a large, open structure (a barn of a hotel).

The opposite of generalization is specialization, a process in which, by adding to the features of meaning, the referential scope of a word is reduced. *Deer*, for instance, used to mean simply ‘animal’ (OE *dēor*), as its German cognate *Tier* still does. Shakespeare writes of “Mice, and Rats, and such small Deare” (*King Lear*). By adding something particular (the family *Cervidae*) to the sense, the scope of the word has been reduced, and it has come to mean a specific kind of animal. Similarly *hound* used to mean ‘dog,’ like its German cognate *Hund*. To this earlier meaning we have added the idea of hunting and thereby restricted the scope of the word, which to us means a special sort of dog, a hunting dog. To the earlier content of *liquor* ‘fluid’ (compare *liquid*) we have added ‘alcoholic.’

Meat once meant simply ‘solid food’ of any kind, a meaning that it retains in *sweetmeat* and throughout the King James Bible (“meat for the belly,” “meat and drink”), though it acquired the more specialized meaning ‘flesh’ by the late Middle English period. *Starve* (OE *steorfan*) used to mean simply ‘to die,’ as its German cognate *sterben* still does. Chaucer writes, for instance, “But as hire man I wol ay lyve and sterve” (*Troilus and Criseyde*). A specific way of dying had to be expressed by a following phrase—for example, “of hunger, of cold.” The *OED* cites “starving with the cold” as late as 1867. The word came to be associated primarily with death by hunger, and for a while there existed a compound verb *hunger-starve*. Although the usual meaning of *starve* now is ‘to die of hunger,’ we also use the phrase “starve to death,” which in earlier times would have been tautological. An additional, toned-down meaning grows out of **hyperbole**, so that “I’m starving” may mean only ‘I’m very hungry.’ The word, of course, is used figuratively, as in “starving for love,” which, as we have seen, once meant ‘dying for love.’ This word furnishes a striking example of specialization and proliferation of meaning.

TRANSFER OF MEANING

There are a good many ways to transfer a word’s meaning. *Long* and *short* are metaphorically transferred from space to time in *a long day*, *a short while*; similarly with such nouns as *length* (of a room or a conversation) and *space* (of a field or an hour). **Metaphor** is also involved when we extend the word *foot* ‘lowest extremity of an animal’ to other things, as in *foot of a mountain, tree*, and so forth, because those are alike in being at the bottom of their things. The meaning of *foot* is shifted in a different way (by **metonymy**) when we use it for a length of twelve inches, by associating part of our anatomy with its typical length. We do much the same thing with *hand* when we use it as a unit of measure for the height of horses. The somewhat similar **synecdoche** involves equating more and less comprehensive terms, as in using *cat* for any ‘feline’ (lion, tiger, etc.), or *earth* ‘ground’ for the planet of which it is a part, or *wheels* for ‘car.’

Meaning may be transferred from one sensory faculty to another (**synesthesia**), as when we use *clear* for what we can hear rather than see, as in *clear-sounding*. *Loud* is transferred the opposite way, from hearing to sight, when we speak of *loud colors*. *Sweet*, with primary reference to taste, may be extended to hearing (*sweet music*), smell (“The rose smells *sweet*”), and all senses at once (*a sweet person*). *Sharp* may be transferred from feeling to taste, and so may *smooth*. *Warm* may shift its usual reference from feeling to sight, as in *warm colors*, and along with *cold* may refer in a general way to all senses, as in *a warm (cold) welcome*.

Abstract meanings may evolve from more **concrete** ones. In prehistoric Old English times, the compound *understand* must have meant ‘to stand among,’ that is, ‘close to’—*under* presumably having had the meaning ‘among,’ as do its German and Latin cognates *unter* and *inter*. But this literal concrete meaning gave way to the abstract sense the word has today. Parallel shifts from concrete to abstract in words meaning ‘understand’ can be seen in German *verstehen* (‘to stand before’), Greek *epistamai* (‘I stand upon’), Latin *comprehendere* (‘to take hold of’), and Italian *capire*, based on Latin *capere* ‘to grasp,’ among others.

The first person to use *grasp* in an abstract sense, as in “He has a good grasp of his subject,” was coining a metaphor. But the shift from concrete to abstract, or from physical to mental, has been so complete that we no longer think of this usage as metaphorical: *grasp* has come to be synonymous with *comprehension* in some contexts, even though in other uses the word has retained its physical reference. It was similar with *glad*, earlier ‘smooth,’ though this word has completely lost the earlier meaning (except in the proper name *Gladstone*, if surnames may be thought of as having such meaning) and may now refer only to a mental state. Likewise, meaning may shift from **subjective** to **objective**, as when *pitiful*, earlier ‘full of pity, compassionate,’ came to mean ‘deserving of pity’; or the shift may be the other way around, as when *fear*, earlier an objective ‘danger,’ came to mean ‘terror,’ a state of mind.

ASSOCIATION OF IDEAS

Change of meaning is often due to association of ideas, whether by metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, or otherwise, as discussed above. Latin *penna*, for instance, originally meant ‘feather’ but came to be used to indicate an instrument for writing, whether made of a feather or not, because of the association of the quill with writing, hence our *pen* (via Old French). Similarly, *paper* is from *papyrus*, a kind of Egyptian plant, though paper is nowadays made from rags, wood, straw, and the like. Sensational magazines used to be printed on paper of inferior quality made from wood pulp. So they were derisively called wood-pulp magazines, or simply *pulps*, in contrast to the *slicks*, those printed on paper of better quality. A computer *mouse* is so called because of a fancied resemblance between the little rodent and that instrument, with its tail-like cord and scurrying movement on a pad. An electronic *virus* can affect the proper functions of a computer program just as its biological namesake can a body of flesh. An extreme result of such infection is a computer *crash*, in which electronic programs collapse, just as a dynamited building or missile-hit airliner does.

Silver has come to be used for eating utensils made of silver—an instance of **synecdoche**—and sometimes, by association, for flatware made of other substances, so that we may speak of stainless steel or even plastic silverware. The product derived from latex and earlier known as *caoutchouc* soon acquired a less difficult name, *rubber*, from association with one of its earliest uses, making erasures on paper by rubbing. *China* ‘earthenware’ originally designated porcelain of a type first manufactured in the country whose name it bears. And the name of a native American bird, *turkey*, derives from the fact that our ancestors somehow got the notion that it was of Turkish origin. In French the same creature is called *dinde*, that is, *d’Inde* ‘from India.’ The French thought that America was India at the time when the name was conferred. These names arose out of associations long since lost.

TRANSFER FROM OTHER LANGUAGES

Other languages have also affected English word meanings. *Thing*, for example, in Old English meant ‘assembly, court of law, legal case,’ a meaning that it had in the other Germanic languages and has retained in Icelandic, as in *Alþingi* ‘all-assembly,’

the name of the Icelandic parliament. Latin *rēs* denoted ‘object, possession, business matter, legal case.’ Because of the overlapping legal uses, *thing* acquired the other meanings of Latin *rēs*, that is, practically any *thing*. German *Ding* had, quite independently, the same semantic history. A word whose meaning has been thus affected by a foreign word with overlapping sense is called a **calque**.

SOUND ASSOCIATIONS

Similarity or identity of sound may likewise influence meaning. *Fay*, from the Old French *fae* ‘fairy’ has influenced *fey*, from Old English *fæge* ‘fated, doomed to die’ to such an extent that *fey* is widely used nowadays in other senses, such as ‘fairy-like, campy’ or ‘visionary.’ The two words are pronounced alike, and there is an association of meaning at one small point: fairies are mysterious; so is being fated to die, even though we all are so fated. There are many other instances of such confusion through **clang association** (that is, association by sound rather than meaning). For example, in conservative use *fulsome* means ‘offensively insincere’ as in “fulsome praise,” but it is often used in the sense ‘extensive’ because of the clang with *full*. Similarly, *fruition* is from Latin *frui* ‘to enjoy’ by way of Old French, and the term originally meant ‘enjoyment’ but now usually means ‘state of bearing fruit, completion’; and *fortuitous* earlier meant ‘occurring by chance’ but now is generally used as a synonym for *fortunate* because of its similarity to that word.

PEJORATION AND AMELIORATION

In addition to a change in its sense or literal meaning, a word may also undergo change in its associations, especially of value. A word may, as it were, go downhill, or it may rise in the world; there is no way of predicting what its career may be. *Politician* has had a downhill development, or pejoration (from Latin *pejor* ‘worse’). So has *knave* (OE *cnafa*), which used to mean simply ‘boy’—it is cognate with German *Knabe*, which retains the earlier meaning. It came to mean ‘serving boy’ (specialization), like that well-known knave of hearts who was given to stealing tarts, and later ‘bad human being’ (pejoration and generalization) so that we may now speak of an old knave or a knavish woman. On its journey downhill this word has thus undergone both specialization and generalization; the knave in cards (for which the usual American term is *jack*) is a further specialization. *Boor* once meant ‘peasant’ but has also had a pejorative development. Its cognate *Bauer* is the usual equivalent of *jack* or *knave* in German card playing, whence English *bower*—as in *right bower* and *left bower*—in the card game euchre.

Lewd, earlier ‘lay, as opposed to clerical,’ underwent pejoration to ‘ignorant,’ ‘base,’ and finally ‘obscene,’ which is the only meaning to survive. A similar fate has befallen the Latin loanword *vulgar*, ultimately from *vulgus* ‘the common people,’ although the earlier meaning is retained in Vulgar Latin, the Latin spoken by ordinary people until it developed into the various Romance languages. *Censure* earlier meant ‘opinion,’ but it has come to mean ‘bad opinion.’ *Criticism* is well on its way to the same pejorative end, nowadays ordinarily meaning ‘adverse judgment’ rather than earlier ‘analysis, evaluation.’ *Deserts* (as in *just deserts*) likewise started out indifferently to mean simply what one deserved, whether good or bad,

but has come to mean ‘punishment.’ A more complex example is *silly* (OE *sælig*), earlier ‘timely,’ which first improved its meaning to ‘happy, blessed’ and then ‘innocent, simple’; but because simplicity, a desirable quality under most circumstances, was thought of as foolishness, the word developed our pejorative meaning. Its German cognate *selig* progressed only to the second stage, though that word may be used facetiously to mean ‘tipsy.’

The opposite of pejoration is amelioration, the improvement in value of a word. Like *censure* and *criticize*, *praise* started out indifferently—it is simply *appraise* ‘put a value on’ with loss of its initial unstressed syllable (aphesis). But *praise* has come to mean ‘value highly.’ The meaning of the word has ameliorated, or elevated. The development of *nice*, going back to Latin *nescius* ‘ignorant,’ is similar. The Old French form used in English meant ‘simple,’ a meaning retained in Modern French *niais*. In the course of its career in English, it has had the meanings ‘foolishly particular’ and then merely ‘particular’ (as in *a nice distinction*). Now it often means no more than ‘pleasant’ or ‘proper,’ having become an all-purpose word of approbation.

Amelioration is also illustrated by *knight*, which used to mean ‘servant,’ as its German relative *Knecht* still does. This particular word has obviously moved far from its earlier meaning, denoting as it usually now does a man who has been honored by his sovereign and who is entitled to prefix *Sir* to his name. *Earl* (OE *eorl*) once meant simply ‘man,’ though in ancient Germanic times it was specially applied to a warrior, who was almost invariably a man of high standing, in contrast to a *churl* (OE *ceorl*), or ordinary freeman. When the Norman kings brought many French titles to England, *earl* remained as the equivalent of Continental *count*.

TABOO AND EUPHEMISM

Some words undergo pejoration because of a **taboo** against talking about the things they name; the replacement for a taboo term is a **euphemism** (from a Greek word meaning ‘good-sounding’). Euphemisms, in their turn, are often subject to pejoration, eventually becoming taboo. Then the whole cycle starts again.

It is not surprising that superstition should play a part in change of meaning, as when *sinister*, the Latin word for ‘left’ (the unlucky side), acquired its present baleful significance. The verb *die*, of Germanic origin, is not once recorded in Old English. Its absence from surviving documents does not necessarily mean that it did not exist in Old English. But in the writings that have come down to us, roundabout expressions such as “go on a journey” are used instead, perhaps because of superstitions connected with the word itself—superstitions that survive into our own day, when people (at least those whom we know personally) “pass away,” “go to sleep,” or “depart.” Louise Pound, the first woman president of the Modern Language Association, collected an imposing and—to the irreverent—amusing list of words and phrases referring to death in her article “American Euphemisms for Dying, Death, and Burial.” She concluded that “one of mankind’s gravest problems is to avoid a straightforward mention of dying or burial.”

Euphemism is especially frequent, and probably always has been, when we must come face to face with the less happy facts of our existence, for life holds even for the most fortunate of people experiences that are inartistic, violent, and

hence shocking to contemplate in the full light of day—for instance, the first and last facts of human existence, birth and death, despite the sentimentality with which we have surrounded them. And it is certainly true that the sting of the latter is somewhat alleviated—for the survivors, anyway—by calling it by some other name, such as “the final sleep,” which is among the many terms cited by Pound in the article just alluded to.

Mortician is a much flossier word than *undertaker* (which is itself a euphemism with such earlier meanings as ‘helper,’ ‘contractor,’ ‘publisher,’ and ‘baptismal sponsor’), but the *loved one* whom he prepares for public view and subsequent interment in a *casket* (earlier a ‘jewel box,’ as in *The Merchant of Venice*) is just as dead as a *corpse* in a *coffin*. Such verbal subterfuges are apparently thought to rob the grave of some of its victory; the notion of death is thus made more tolerable to human consciousness than it would otherwise be. Birth is much more plainly alluded to nowadays than it used to be. There was a time, within the memory of those still living, when *pregnant* was avoided in polite company. A woman who was *with child*, *going to have a baby*, *in a family way*, or *enceinte* would deliver during her *confinement*, or, if one wanted to be exceptionally fancy about it, her *accouchement*.

Ideas of decency profoundly affect language. During the Victorian era, ladies and gentlemen were very sensitive about using the word *leg*, *limb* being almost invariably substituted, sometimes even if only the legs of a piano were being referred to. In the very year that marks the beginning of Queen Victoria’s long reign, Captain Frederick Marryat in his *Diary in America* (1837) noted the American taboo on this word when, having asked a young American lady who had taken a spill whether she had hurt her leg, she turned from him, “evidently much shocked, or much offended,” later explaining to him that in America the word *leg* was never used in the presence of ladies. Later, the captain visited a school for young ladies where he saw, according to his own testimony, “a square piano-forte with four limbs,” all dressed in little frilled pantalettes. For reasons that it would be difficult to analyze, a similar taboo was placed on *belly*, *stomach* being usually substituted for it, along with such nursery terms as *tummy* and *breadbasket* and the advertising copywriter’s *midriff*.

Toilet, a diminutive of French *toile* ‘cloth,’ in its earliest English uses meant a piece of cloth in which to wrap clothes; subsequently it came to be used for a cloth cover for a dressing table, and then the table itself, as when Lydia Languish in Sheridan’s *The Rivals* says, “Here, my dear Lucy, hide these books. Quick, quick! Fling *Peregrine Pickle* under the toilet—throw *Roderick Random* into the closet.” (A century or so ago, the direction for the disposal of *Roderick Random* would have been as laughable as that for *Peregrine Pickle*, for *closet* was then frequently used for *water closet*, now practically obsolete, though the short form, *WC*, is still used in Britain, especially in signs.) *Toilet* came to be used as a euphemism for *privy*—itself a euphemism (‘private place’), as are *latrine* (ultimately derived from Latin *lavāre* ‘to wash’) and *lavatory* (note the euphemistic phrase “to wash one’s hands”). But *toilet* is now frequently replaced by *rest room*, *comfort station*, *powder room*, the coy *little boys’* (or *girls’*) *room*, or especially *bathroom*, even though there may be no tub and no occasion for taking a bath. One may even hear of a dog’s “going to the bathroom” in the living room. The British also use

loo, a word of obscure origin, or *Gents* and *Ladies* for public facilities. It is safe to predict that these evasions will in their turn come to be regarded as indecorous, and other expressions will be substituted for them. Even in Old English, that *facility* (another current term for it) was called *goldhordhūs* ‘gold hoard house, treasury.’

Euphemism is likewise resorted to in reference to certain diseases. Like terms for birth, death, and excretion, those for disease are doubtless rooted in anxiety and superstition. An ailment of almost any sort is often referred to as a *condition* (*heart condition*, *kidney condition*, *malignant condition*, and so forth), so that *condition*, hitherto a more or less neutral word, has thus had a pejorative development, coming to mean ‘bad condition.’ (Although *to have a condition* means ‘to be in bad health,’ *to be in condition* continues, confusingly enough, to mean ‘to be in good health.’) *Leprosy* is no longer used by the American Medical Association because of its connotations; it is now replaced by the colorless *Hansen’s disease*. *Cancer* may be openly referred to, though it is notable that some astrologers have abandoned the term as a sign of the zodiac, referring instead to those born under Cancer as “Moon Children.” The taboo has been removed from reference to the various specific venereal diseases, formerly *blood diseases* or *social diseases*. Recent years have seen a greater tendency toward straightforward language about such matters. No euphemisms seem to have arisen for *AIDS* or *HIV*.

Old age and its attendant decay have probably been made more bearable for many elderly people by calling them *senior citizens*. A similar verbal humanitarianism is responsible for a good many other voguish euphemisms, such as *underprivileged* ‘poor,’ now largely supplanted by *disadvantaged*; *sick* ‘insane’; and *exceptional child* ‘a pupil of subnormal mentality.’ (Although children who exceed expectations have been stigmatized as *overachievers*, they are also sometimes called *exceptional*, apparently because of an assumption that any departure from the average is disabling.)

Sentimental equalitarianism has led us to attempt to dignify occupations by giving them high-sounding titles. Thus a *janitor* (originally a doorkeeper, from *Janus*, the doorkeeper of heaven in Roman mythology) has become a *custodian* (one who has custody), and *teachers* have become *educators* (a four-syllable term presumably making the designee twice as important as does a two-syllable one). There are many *engineers* who would not know the difference between a calculator and a cantilever. H. L. Mencken (*American Language*) cites, among a good many others, *demolition engineer* ‘house wrecker,’ *sanitary engineer* ‘garbage man,’ and *extermination engineer* ‘rat catcher.’ The meaning of *profession* has been generalized to such an extent that it may include practically any trade or vocation. *Webster’s Third* illustrates the extended sense of the word with quotations referring to the “old profession of farming” and “men who make it their profession to hunt the hippopotamus.” The term has also been applied to plumbing, waiting on tables, and almost any other gainful occupation. Such occupations are both useful and honorable, but they are not professions according to the old undemocratic and now perhaps outmoded sense of the term.

As long ago as 1838 James Fenimore Cooper in *The American Democrat* denounced such subterfuges as *boss* for *master* and *help* for *servant*, but these seem very mild nowadays. One of the great concerns of the progressive age in which we live would seem to be to ensure that nobody’s feelings shall ever be

hurt—at least not by words. And so the coinage of new euphemisms in what has been called “politically correct” language has made it often difficult to tell the seriously used term (*motivationally challenged* ‘lazy’) from the satirical one (*follicularly challenged* ‘bald’). As the Roman satirist Juvenal put it, “In the present state of the world it is difficult not to write satire.”

THE FATE OF INTENSIFYING WORDS

Words rise and fall not only on a scale of goodness, by amelioration and pejoration, but also on a scale of strength. **Intensifiers** constantly stand in need of replacement, because they are so frequently used that their intensifying force is worn down. As an adverb of degree, *very* has only an intensifying function; it has altogether lost its independent meaning ‘truly,’ though as an adjective it survives with older meanings in phrases like “the very heart of the matter” and “the very thought of you.” Chaucer does not use *very* as an intensifying adverb; the usage was doubtless beginning to be current in his day, though the *OED* has no contemporary citations. The *verray* in Chaucer’s description of his ideal soldier, “He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght,” is an adjective; the meaning of the line is approximately ‘He was a true, perfect, gentle knight.’

For Chaucer and his contemporaries, *full* seems to have been the usual intensifying adverb, though Old English *swīðe* (the adverbial form of *swīð* ‘strong’) retained its intensifying function until the middle of the fifteenth century, with independent meanings ‘rapidly’ and ‘instantly’ surviving much longer. *Right* was also widely used as an intensifier in Middle English times, as in Chaucer’s description of the Clerk of Oxenford: “he nas [that is, *ne was*] nat right fat,” which is to say, ‘He wasn’t very fat.’ This usage survives formally in *Right Reverend*, the title of a bishop; in *Right Honourable*, that of members of the Privy Council and a few other dignitaries; and in *Right Worshipful*, that of most lord mayors; as also in the more or less informal usages *right smart*, *right well*, *right away*, *right there*, and the like.

Sore, as in *sore afraid*, was similarly long used as an intensifier for adjectives and adverbs; its use to modify verbs is even older. Its cognate *sehr* is still the usual intensifier in German, in which language it has completely lost its independent use.

In view of the very understandable tendency of such intensifying words to become dulled, it is not surprising that we should cast about for other words to replace them when we really want to be emphatic. “It’s been a *very* pleasant evening” seems quite inadequate under certain circumstances, and we may instead say, “It’s been an *awfully* pleasant evening”; “*very* nice” may likewise become “*terribly* nice.” In negative utterances, *too* is widely used as an intensifier: “Newberry’s not *too* far from here”; “Juvenile-court law practice is not *too* lucrative.” Also common in negative statements and in questions are *that* and *all that*: “I’m not *that* tired”; “Is he *all that* eager to go to Daytona?”

Prodigiously was for a while a vogueish substitute for *very*, so that a Regency “blood” like Thackeray’s Jos Sedley might speak admiringly of a shapely woman as “a prodigiously fine gel” or even a “monstrous fine” one. The first of these now-forgotten intensifiers dates approximately from the second half of the seventeenth century; the second is about a century earlier. An anonymous contributor

to the periodical *The World* in 1756 deplored the “pomp of utterance of our present women of fashion; which, though it may tend to spoil many a pretty mouth, can never recommend an indifferent one”; the writer cited in support of his statement the overuse of *vastly*, *horridly*, *abominably*, *immensely*, and *excessively* as intensifiers (Tucker 96).

SOME CIRCUMSTANCES OF SEMANTIC CHANGE

The meaning of a word may vary according to the group that uses it. For all speakers, *smart* has the meaning ‘intelligent,’ but there is a specialized, especially British, class usage in which it means ‘fashionable.’ The meaning of *a smart woman* may thus vary with the social group of the speaker and may have to be inferred from the context. The earliest meaning of this word seems to have been ‘sharp,’ as in *a smart blow*. *Sharp* has also been used in the sense ‘up-to-date, fashionable,’ as in *a sharp dresser*. But with the advent of grunge and bagginess, that use largely disappeared.

Similarly, a word’s meaning may vary according to changes in the thing to which it refers. *Hall* (OE *heall*), for instance, once meant a very large roofed place, like the splendid royal dwelling place Heorot, where Beowulf fought Grendel. Such buildings were usually without smaller attached rooms, though Heorot had a “bower” (*būr*), earlier a separate cottage, but in *Beowulf* a bedroom to which the king and queen retired. (This word survives only in the sense ‘arbor, enclosure formed by vegetation.’) For retainers, the hall served as meeting room, feasting room, and sleeping room. Later *hall* came to mean ‘the largest room in a great house,’ used for large gatherings such as receptions and feasts, though the use of the word for the entire structure survives in the names of a number of manor houses such as Little Wenham Hall and Speke Hall in England and of some dormitory or other college buildings in America. A number of other meanings connote size and some degree of splendor, a far cry from the modern use of *hall* as a narrow passageway leading to rooms or as a vestibule or entrance passage immediately inside the front door of a house.

Another modification of meaning results from a shift in point of view. *Crescent*, from the present participle of Latin *cresco*, used to mean simply ‘growing, increasing,’ as in Pompey’s “My powers are Cressent, and my Auguring hope / Sayes it will come to’th’full” (*Antony and Cleopatra*). The new, or growing, moon was thus called the crescent moon. There has been a shift, however, in the dominant element of meaning, the emphasis coming to be put entirely on shape, specifically on a particular shape of the moon, rather than upon growth. *Crescent* thus came to denote the moon between its new and quarter phases, whether increasing or decreasing, and then any similar shape, as in its British use for an arc-shaped street. Similarly, in *veteran* (Latin *veteranus*, a derivative of *vetus* ‘old’), the emphasis has shifted from age to military service, though not necessarily long service, as we may speak of a *young veteran*. The fact that the phrase is etymologically self-contradictory is of no significance as far as present usage is concerned. The word is, of course, extended to other areas—for instance, *veteran politician*; in its extended meanings it continues to connote long experience and usually mature years as well.

VOGUE FOR WORDS OF LEARNED ORIGIN

When learned words become popular, they almost inevitably develop new, often less exact meanings. *Philosophy*, for instance, earlier 'love of wisdom,' has now a popular sense 'practical opinion or body of opinions,' as in "the philosophy of salesmanship" and "homespun philosophy." An error in translation from a foreign language may result in a useful new meaning—for example, *psychological moment* means 'most opportune time' rather than 'psychological momentum,' which is the proper translation of German *psychologisches Moment*, from which it comes. The popular misunderstanding of *inferiority complex*, first used to designate an unconscious sense of inferiority manifesting itself in assertive behavior, has given us a synonym for *diffidence*, *shyness*. It is similar with *guilt complex*, now used to denote nothing more psychopathic than a feeling of guilt. The term *complex*, as first used by psychoanalysts more than a century ago, designated a type of aberration resulting from the unconscious suppression of emotions. The word soon passed into vogue and subsequently into general use to designate an obsession of any kind—a bee in the bonnet, as it were. Among its progeny are *Oedipus complex*, *herd complex*, and *sex complex*. The odds on its increasing fecundity would seem to be rather high.

Other fashionable terms from psychoanalysis and psychology, with which our times are so intensely preoccupied, are *subliminal* 'influencing behavior below the level of awareness,' with reference to a sneaky kind of advertising technique; *behavior pattern*, meaning simply 'behavior'; *neurotic*, with a wide range of meaning, including 'nervous, high-strung, artistic by temperament, eccentric, or given to worry'; *compulsive* 'habitual,' as in *compulsive drinker* and *compulsive criminal*; and *schizophrenia* 'practically any mental or emotional disorder.'

It is not surprising that newer, popular meanings of what were once more or less technical terms should generally show a considerable extension of the earlier technical meanings. Thus, *sadism* has come to mean simply 'cruelty' and *exhibitionism* merely 'showing off,' without any of the earlier connotations of sexual perversion. The word *psychology* itself may mean nothing more than 'mental processes' in a vague sort of way. An intense preoccupation with what is fashionably and doubtless humanely referred to as *mental illness*—a less enlightened age than ours called it *insanity* or *madness*, and people afflicted with it were said to be *crazy*—must to a large extent be responsible for the use of such terms as have been cited. Also notable is the already mentioned specialization of *sick* to refer to mental imbalance.

A great darling among the loosely used pseudoscientific **vogue words** of recent years is *image* in the sense 'impression that others subconsciously have of someone.' A jaundiced observer of modern life might well suppose that what we actually are is not nearly so important as the image that we are able—to use another vogue word—to *project*. If the "image" is phony, what difference does it make? In a time when political campaigns are won or lost by the impression a candidate makes on the television screen and therefore in opinion polls, *image* is all important.

A particularly important kind of image to convey, especially for politicians, is the *father image*. Young people are apparently in great need of a *father figure* to *relate to*, just as they require a *role model* to achieve the most successful *lifestyle*. The last-mentioned expression, which has all but replaced the earlier vogueish *way*

of life, may refer to casual dress, jogging, homosexuality, the use of a Jacuzzi hot tub, or a great many other forms of behavior that have little to do with what has traditionally been thought of as style. *Peer pressure* from one's *peer group* is often responsible for the adoption of one "style" or another; the voguish use of *peer* has doubtless seeped down from educationists, whose *expertise* in this, as in many other matters, is greatly admired, although not always richly rewarded, by the "sponsoring society."

Among the more impressive vogue words of recent years are *charisma* and *charismatic* ('(having) popular appeal' (earlier, 'a spiritual gift, such as that of tongues or prophesy'). The original sense of *ambience* or *ambiance* 'surrounding atmosphere, environment' has shifted considerably in the description of a chair as "crafted with a Spanish ambience" and has slipped away altogether in the puffery of a restaurant said to have "great food, served professionally in an atmosphere of ambience." Other popular expressions are *scenario*, *paradigm*, *bottom line*, and *empowerment*.

Computer jargon has been a rich source of vogue words in recent years. Although *input* and *output* have been around since the early sixteenth and mid nineteenth centuries, respectively, their current fashionableness results from an extension of their use for information fed into and spewed out of a computer. *Interface* is another nineteenth-century term for the surface between any two substances—for example, oil floating on the top of a pan of water; it was taken up in computer use to denote the equipment that presents the computer's work for human inspection, such as a printout or a monitor display. Now the word is used as a noun to mean just 'connection' and as a verb to mean 'connect' or 'work together smoothly.'

LANGUAGE AND SEMANTIC MARKING

One of the awkward problems of English, and indeed of many languages, is a lack of means for talking about persons without specifying their sex. Apparently sexual differences have been so important for the human species and human societies that most languages make obligatory distinctions between males and females in both vocabulary and grammar. On those occasions, however, when one wishes to discuss human beings without reference to their sex, the obligatory distinctions are bothersome and may be prejudicial. Consequently, in recent years many publishers and editors have tried to eliminate both lexical and grammatical bias toward masculine forms, which had been used generically for either sex.

The bias in question arises because of the phenomenon of **semantic marking**. A word like *sheep* is **unmarked** for sex, since it is applicable to either males or females of the species; there are separate terms **marked** for maleness (*ram*) and femaleness (*ewe*) when they are needed. If terms for all species followed this model, no problems would arise, but unfortunately they do not. *Duck* is like *sheep* in being unmarked for sex, but it has only one marked companion, namely, *drake* for the male. Because we lack a single term for talking about the female bird, we must make do with an ambiguity in the term *duck*, which refers either to a member of the species without consideration of sex or to a female. An opposite sort of problem arises with *lion* and *lioness*; the latter term is marked for femaleness, and the former

is unmarked and therefore used either for felines without consideration of sex or for males of the species. The semantic features of these terms, as they relate to sex, can be shown as follows (+ means ‘present,’ – ‘absent,’ and \pm ‘unmarked’):

	Sheep	Ram	Ewe	Duck	Drake	Lion	Lioness
Male	\pm	+	–	\pm	+	\pm	–
Female	\pm	–	+	\pm	–	\pm	+

Lions and ducks are quite unconcerned with what we call them, but we human beings are very much concerned with what we call ourselves. Consequently, the linguistic problem of referring to men and women is both complex and emotional. *Woman* is clearly marked for femaleness, like *lioness*. Some persons interpret *man* as unmarked for sex, like *lion*. Others point out that it is so often used for males in contrast to females that it must be regarded as marked for maleness, like *drake*; they also observe that because of the male connotations of *man*, women are often by implication excluded from statements in which the word is used generically—for example, “Men have achieved great discoveries in science during the last hundred years.” By such language we may be led unconsciously to assume that males rather than females are the achievers of our species. If, as some etymologists believe, the word *man* is historically related to the word *mind*, its original sense was probably something like ‘the thinker,’ and it clearly denoted the species rather than the sex. In present use, however, the word is often ambiguous, as in the example cited a few lines above. The ambiguity can be resolved by context: “Men (the species) are mortal” versus “Men (the sex) have shorter lives than women.” Nevertheless, ambiguity is sometimes awkward and often annoying to the linguistically sensitive.

To solve the problem, would-be linguistic engineers have proposed respellings like *womyn* for *women*. (*Wyemen* would be a phonetically more adequate, if politically less correct, spelling.) More realistically, editors and others have substituted other words (such as *person*) whenever *man* might be used of both sexes. Thus we have *chairperson*, *anchorperson* (for the one who anchors a TV news program), *layperson*, and even *straw person*. The new forms were bound to call forth some heavy-handed humor in forms like *woperson*. Other efforts to avoid sexual reference, such as *supervisor* in place of *foreman* and *flight attendant* in place of both *steward* and *stewardess*, are now usual. And *housespouse* as a replacement for both *housewife* and its newfound mate, *househusband*, has a lilt and a swagger that make it appealing.

The grammatical problems of sexual reference are especially great in the choice of a pronoun after indefinite pronouns like *everyone*, *anyone*, and *someone*. Following the model of unmarked *man*, handbooks have recommended unmarked *he* in expressions like “Everyone tried his best,” with reference to a mixed group. The other generally approved option, “Everyone tried his or her best,” is wordy and can become intolerably so with repetition, as in “Everyone who has not finished writing his or her paper before he or she is required to move to his or her next class can take it with him or her.”

In colloquial English, speakers long ago solved that problem by using the plural pronouns *they*, *them*, *their*, and *theirs* after indefinites. As the narrator says in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, "Everybody has their taste in noises as well as in other matters." Although still abjured by the linguistically fastidious, such use of *they* and its forms has been common for about 400 years, is increasing in formal English, and has in fact been recommended by professional groups like the National Council of Teachers of English. Idealists have also proposed a number of invented forms to fill the gap, such as *thon* (from *that one*), *he'er*, *he/she*, and *shem*, but almost no one has taken them seriously.

Language reformers in the past have not been notably successful in remodeling English nearer to their hearts' desire. The language has a way of following its own course and leaving would-be guides behind. Whether the current interest in degenderizing language will have more lasting results than other changes proposed and labored for is an open question. Unselfconscious speech long ago solved the grammatical problem with the *everybody...they* construction. If the lexical problem is solved by the extended use of *person* and other epicene alternatives, we will have witnessed a remarkable influence by those who edit books and periodicals. Whatever the upshot, the contemporary concern is testimony to one kind of semantic sensibility among present-day English speakers.

SEMANTIC CHANGE IS INEVITABLE

It is a great pity that language cannot be the exact, finely attuned instrument that deep thinkers wish it to be. But the fact is, as we have seen, that the meaning of every word is susceptible to change, and some words have changed meaning radically in the course of their history. It is probably safe to predict that the members of the human race, *homines sapientes* more or less, will go on making absurd noises with their mouths at one another in what idealists among them will go on considering a deplorably sloppy and inadequate manner, and yet manage to understand one another well enough for their own purposes.

The idealists may, if they wish, settle upon Esperanto, Ido, Ro, Volapük, or any other of the excellent scientific languages that have been laboriously constructed. The game of constructing such languages is still going on. Some naively suppose that, should one of these ever become generally used, there would be an end to misunderstanding, followed by an age of universal brotherhood—on the assumption that we always agree with and love those whom we understand. In fact, we frequently disagree violently with those whom we understand very well. (Cain doubtless understood Abel well enough.)

But be that as it may, it should be obvious that, if such an **artificial language** were by some miracle ever to be accepted and generally used, it would be susceptible to precisely the same changes in meaning that have been our concern in this chapter as well as to such changes in structure as have been our concern throughout—the kind of changes undergone by those natural languages that have evolved over the eons. And most of the manifold phenomena of life—hatred, disease, famine, birth, death, sex, war, atoms, isms, and people, to name only a few—would remain just as messy and unsatisfactory to those unwilling to accept them as they have always been, regardless of what words we call them by.

FOR FURTHER READING

OVERVIEWS

- Ayto. *Movers and Shakers*.
 Goddard. *Semantic Analysis*.
 Hurford, Heasley, and Smith. *Semantics*.
 Jeffries. *Meaning in English*.
 Kreidler. *Introducing English Semantics*.
 Lakoff and Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*.
 Leech. *Semantics*.
 Löbner. *Understanding Semantics*.

SOME SEMANTIC CATEGORIES

- Allan and Burridge. *Euphemism & Dysphemism*.
 Ayto. *Euphemisms*.

GENERAL SEMANTICS

- Hayakawa and Hayakawa. *Language in Thought and Action*.

DICTIONARIES

- Merriam-Webster Online Search*: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>.
Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. CD-ROM.
Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. CD-ROM.



CHAPTER

II

NEW WORDS FROM
OLD

The last chapter points out that new words are constantly entering the language. This chapter examines five processes by which they do so: **creating**, **combining**, **shortening**, **blending**, and **shifting** the grammatical uses of old words. Shifting the meanings of old words is considered also in the preceding chapter, and borrowing from other languages is considered in the next.

CREATING WORDS

ROOT CREATIONS

Most new words come in one way or another from older words. To create a word out of no other meaningful elements (a **root creation**) is a very rare phenomenon indeed. The trade name *Kodak* is sometimes cited as such a word. It first appeared in print in the U.S. *Patent Office Gazette* of 1888 and was, according to George Eastman, who invented the word as well as the camera it names, “a purely arbitrary combination of letters, not derived in whole or in part from any existing word” (Mencken, *Supplement I*), though his biographer points to the fact that his mother’s family name began with the letter *K*.

Other commercial names—like those for the artificial fabrics *nylon* (a term never trademarked), *Dacron*, and *Orlon*—also lack an etymology in the usual sense. According to a Du Pont company publication (*Context* 7.2, 1978), when nylon was first developed, it was called *polyhexamethyleneadipamide*. Realizing the stuff needed a catchier name than that, the company thought of *duprooh*, an acronym for “Du Pont pulls rabbit out of hat,” but instead settled on *no-run* until it was pointed out that stockings made of the material were not really run-proof. So the spelling of that word was reversed to *nuron*, which was modified to *nilon* to make it sound less like a nerve tonic. Then, to prevent a pronunciation like “nillon,” the company changed the *i* to *y*, producing *nylon*. If this account is correct, beneath that apparently quite arbitrary word lurks the English expression *no-run*. Most trade names are clearly based on already existing words. *Vaseline*, for instance, was made from German *Wasser* ‘water’ plus Greek *elaion* ‘oil’

(Mencken, *American Language*); *Kleenex* was made from *clean* and *Cutex* from *cuticle*, both with the addition of a rather widely used but quite meaningless pseudoscientific suffix *-ex*.

ECHOIC WORDS

Sound alone is the basis of a limited number of words, called **echoic** or **onomatopoeic**, like *bang*, *burp*, *splash*, *tinkle*, *bobwhite*, and *cuckoo*. Words that are actually imitative of sound, like *meow*, *moo*, *bowwow*, and *vroom*—though these differ from language to language—can be distinguished from those like *bump* and *flick*, which are called **symbolic**. Symbolic words regularly come in sets that rime (*bump*, *lump*, *clump*, *hump*) or alliterate (*flick*, *flash*, *flip*, *flop*) and derive their symbolic meaning at least in part from the other members of their sound-alike sets. Both imitative and symbolic words frequently show doubling, sometimes with slight variation, as in *bowwow*, *choo-choo*, and *pe(e)wee*.

EJACULATIONS

Some words imitate more or less instinctive vocal responses. One of these **ejaculations**, *ouch*, is something of a mystery: it does not appear in British writing except as an Americanism. The *OED* derives it from German *autsch*, an exclamation presumably imitative of what a German exclaims at fairly mild pain, such as stubbing a toe or hitting a thumb with a tack hammer—hardly anything more severe, for when one is suffering really rigorous pain one is not likely to have the presence of mind to remember to say “Ouch!” The vocal reaction, if any, is likely to be a shriek or a scream. *Ouch* may be regarded as a conventional representation of the sounds actually made when one is in pain. The interesting thing is that the written form has become so familiar, so completely conventionalized, that Americans (and Germans) do actually say “Ouch!” when they have hurt themselves so slightly as to be able to remember what they *ought* to say under the circumstances.

Other such written representations, all of them highly conventionalized, of what are thought to be “natural utterances” have also become actual words—for instance, *ha-ha*, with the variant *ho-ho* for Santa Claus and other jolly fat men, and the girlish *tehee*, which the naughty but nonetheless delectable Alison utters in Chaucer’s “Miller’s Tale,” in what is perhaps the most indecorously funny line in English poetry.

Now, it is likely that, if Alison were a real-life woman (rather than better-than-life, as she is by virtue of being the creation of a superb artist), upon receipt of the misdirected kiss she might have tittered, twittered, giggled, or gurgled under the decidedly improper circumstances in which she had placed herself. But how to write a titter, a twitter, a giggle, or a gurgle? Chaucer was confronted with the problem of representing by alphabetical symbols whatever the appropriate vocal response might have been, and *tehee*, which was doubtless more or less conventional in his day, was certainly as good a choice as he could have made. The form with which he chose to represent girlish glee has remained conventional. When we encounter it in reading, we think—and, if reading aloud, we actually say—[ti’hi], and the effect seems perfectly realistic to us. (Alison, in her pre-vowel-shift

pronunciation, would presumably have said [te'he].) But it is highly doubtful that anyone ever uttered *tehee*, or *ha-ha*, or *ho-ho*, except as a reflection of the written form. Laughter, like pain, is too paroxysmal in nature, too varying from individual to individual, and too unspeechlike to be represented accurately by speech sounds.

It is somewhat different with a vocal manifestation of disgust, contempt, or annoyance, which might be represented phonetically (but only approximately) as [č]. This was, as early as the mid-fifteenth century, represented as *tush*, and somewhat later less realistically as *twish*. *Twish* became archaic as a written form, but [təʃ] survives as a spoken interpretation of *tush*.

Pish and *pshaw* likewise represent “natural” emotional utterances of disdain, contempt, impatience, irritation, and the like, but have become conventionalized, as shown by the citation in *Webster’s Third* for *pish*: “pished and pshawed a little at what had happened.” Both began as something like [pʃ]. W. S. Gilbert combined two such utterances to form the name of a “noble lord,” Pish-Tush, in *The Mikado*, with two similarly expressive ones, Pooh-Bah, for the overweeningly aristocratic “Lord High Everything Else.” Yum-Yum, the name of the delightful heroine of the same opera, is similarly a conventionalized representation of sounds supposedly made as a sign of pleasure in eating. From the interjection *yum-yum* comes the adjective *yummy*, still childish in its associations—but give it time.

Pew or *pugh* is imitative of the disdainful sniff with which many persons react to a bad smell, resembling a vigorously articulated [p]. But, as with the previous examples, it has been conventionalized into a word pronounced [pyu] or prolongedly as [ˈpiːyu]. *Pooh* (sometimes with reduplication as *pooh-pooh*) is a variant, with somewhat milder implications. The reduplicated form may be used as a verb, as in “He pooh-poohed my suggestion.” *Fie*, used for much the same purposes as *pew*, is now archaic; it likewise represents an attempt at imitation. *Faugh* is probably a variant of *fie*; so, doubtless, is *phew*. *Ugh*, from a tensing of the stomach muscles followed by a glottal stop, has been conventionalized as an exclamation of disgust or horror or as a grunt attributed, in pre-ethnic-sensitive days, to American Indians.

A palatal click, articulated by placing the tongue against the palate and then withdrawing it, sucking in the breath, is an expression of impatience or contempt. It is also sometimes used in reduplicated form (there may in fact be three or more such clicks) in scolding children, as if to express shock and regret at some antisocial act. A written form is *tut(-tut)*, which has become a word in its own right, pronounced not as a click but according to the spelling. However, *tsk-tsk*, which is intended to represent the same click, is also used with the pronunciation [ˈtɪskˈtɪsk]. Older written forms are *tchick* and *tck* (with or without reduplication). *Tut(-tut)* has long been used as a verb, as in Bulwer-Lytton’s “pishing and tutting” (1849) and Hall Caine’s “He laughed and tut-tutted” (1894), both cited by the *OED*.

A sound we frequently make to signify agreement may be represented approximately as [mʰm]. This is written as *uh-huh*, and the written form is responsible for the pronunciation [əˈhə]. The *p* of *yep* and *nope* was probably intended to represent the glottal stop frequently heard in the pronunciation of *yes* (without -s) and *no*, but one also frequently hears [yɛp] and [nɒp], pronunciations doubtless based on the written forms.

The form *brack* or *braak* is sometimes used to represent the so-called Bronx cheer. Eric Partridge (*Shakespeare's Bawdy*) has suggested, however, that Hamlet's "Buz, buz!" spoken impatiently to Polonius, is intended to represent the vulgar noise also known as "the raspberry." (*Raspberry* in this sense comes from the Cockney rhyming slang phrase *raspberry tart* for *fart*.)

In all these cases, some nonlinguistic sound effect came first—a cry of pain, a giggle, a sneeze, or whatever. Someone tried to represent it in writing, always inadequately by a sequence of letters, which were then pronounced as a new word in the language. And so the vocabulary of ejaculations grew.

COMBINING WORDS: COMPOUNDING

Creating words from nothing is comparatively rare. Most words are made from other words, for example, by combining whole words or word parts. A compound is made by putting two or more words together to form a new word with a meaning in some way different from that of its elements—for instance, a *blackboard* is not the same thing as a *black board*; indeed, nowadays many blackboards are green, or some other color. Compounds may be spelled in three ways: solid, hyphenated, or open (*hatchback*, *laid-back*, *center back* = a volleyball position), as explained below. The choice between those three ways is unpredictable and variable.

From earliest times compounding has been very common in English, as in other Germanic languages as well. Old English has *blīðheort* 'blitheheart(ed),' *eaxlgestella* 'shoulder-companion = comrade,' *brēostnet* 'breast-net = corslet,' *leornungcniht* 'learning retainer (knight) = disciple,' *wærloga* 'oath-breaker = traitor (warlock),' *woroldcyning* 'world-king = earthly king,' *fullfyllan* 'to fulfill,' and many other such compounds.

The compounding process has gone on continuously. Examples from recent years are *air kiss* 'a kissing motion next to the cheek,' *baby boomer*, *date rape*, *downsize*, *drive-by shooting*, *ear bud* 'a small receiver placed in the ear to amplify sound, as from a Walkman,' *eye candy* 'an attractive but intellectually undemanding image,' *flat panel* 'a thin computer monitor,' *generation X* (Y, etc.), *glass ceiling*, *ground zero*, *mommy* (or *daddy*) *track*, *road* (or *air*) *rage*, *smart card*, *soccer mom*, and *voice mail*. The Internet has been particularly fecund in producing new terms, such as *dot bomb* 'a failed Internet business' (a pun on *dot-com* 'a company that operates on the Web,' from the domain suffix ".com"), *Internet café*, *laptop*, *pop-under* 'an ad at the bottom of the browser window,' *search engine*, *webcasting*, *weblog* (the second element ultimately from a ship's *log*[book]), and *webmaster*.

SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION OF COMPOUNDS

Compound adjectives are usually hyphenated, like *one-horse*, *loose-jointed*, and *front-page*, though some that are particularly well established, such as *outgoing*, *overgrown*, *underbred*, and *forthcoming*, are solid. It is similar with compound verbs, like *overdo*, *broadcast*, *sidestep*, beside *double-date* and *baby-sit*, though these sometimes occur as two words. Compound nouns are likewise inconsistent: we write *ice cream*, *Boy Scout*, *real estate*, *post office*, *high school* as two words;

we hyphenate *sit-in*, *go-between*, *fire-eater*, *higher-up*; but we write solid *icebox*, *postmaster*, *highlight*. Hyphenation varies to some extent with the dictionary one consults, the style books of editors and publishers, and individual whim, among other factors. Many compound prepositions like *upon*, *throughout*, *into*, and *within* are written solid, but others like *out of* have a space. Also written solid are compound adverbs such as *nevertheless*, *moreover*, and *henceforth* and compound pronouns like *whoever* and *myself*. (For a study of the writing of compounds, see *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* 30a–31a.)

A more significant characteristic of compounds—one that tells us whether we are dealing with two or more words used independently or as a lexical unit—is their tendency to be more strongly stressed on one or the other of their elements, in contrast to the more or less even stress characteristic of phrases. A *man-eating shrimp* would be a quite alarming marine phenomenon; nevertheless, the contrasting primary and secondary stresses of *man* and *eat* (symbolized by the hyphen) make it perfectly clear that we are here concerned with a hitherto unheard-of anthropophagous decapod. There is, however, nothing in the least alarming about a *man eating shrimp*, with approximately even stresses on *man* and *eat*.

The primary-secondary stress in compounds marks the close connection between the constituents that gives the compound its special meaning. In effect, it welds together the elements and thus makes the difference between the members of the following pairs:

hotbed: 'place encouraging rapid growth'
 highbrow: 'intellectual'
 blackball: 'vote against'
 greenhouse: 'heated structure to grow plants'
 makeup: 'cosmetics'
 headhunter: 'savage or recruiter of executives'
 loudspeaker: 'sound amplifier'

hot bed: 'warm sleeping place'
 high brow: 'result of receding hair'
 black ball: 'ball colored black'
 green house: 'house painted green'
 make up: 'reconcile'
 head hunter: 'leader on a safari'
 loud speaker: 'noisy talker'

In compound nouns, it is usually the first element that gets the primary stress, as in all the examples above, but in adverbs and prepositions, it is the last (*nevertheless*, *without*). For verbs and pronouns it is impossible to generalize (*broadcast*, *fulfill*, *somebody* [or *somebody*], *whoever*). The important thing is the unifying function of stress for compounds of whatever sort.

Generally when complete loss of secondary stress occurs, phonetic change occurs as well. For instance, *English mán*, having in the course of compounding become *English-màn*, proceeded to become *Englishman* [-mən]. The same vowel reduction has occurred in *highwayman* 'robber,' *gentleman*, *horseman*, and *postman*, but not in *businessman*, *milkman*, and *iceman*. It is similar with the [-lənd] of *Maryland*, *Iceland*, *woodland*, and *highland* as contrasted with the secondarily stressed final syllables of such newer compounds as *wonderland*, *movieland*, and *Disneyland*; with the *-folk* of *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* (there is a common American pronunciation of the former with [-fok] and, by assimilation, with [-fɔrk]); and with the *-mouth* of *Portsmouth*, the *-combe* of *Wycombe*, the *-burgh* of *Edinburgh* (usually [-brə]), and the *-stone* of *Folkestone* ([-stən]). Even more drastic changes occur in the final syllables of *coxswain* ['kɒksən], *Keswick* ['kɛsɪk], and *Durham* ['dərəm] (though in *Birmingham*, as the name of a city in Alabama, the *-ham* is pronounced as the

spelling suggests it should be). Similarly drastic changes occur in both syllables of *boatswain* ['bosən], *forecastle* ['foksəl], *breakfast*, *Christmas* (that is, *Christ's mass*), *cupboard*, and *Greenwich*. (Except for Greenwich Village in New York and Greenwich, Connecticut, the American place name is usually pronounced as spelled, rather than as [grɛniĉ] or [grɛniʃ]. The British pronunciation is sometimes [grɪniʃ].)

Perhaps it is lack of familiarity with the word—just as the landlubber might pronounce *boatswain* as ['bot,swen]—that has given rise to an analytical pronunciation of *clapboard*, traditionally ['klæbɔrd]. *Grindstone* and *wristband* used to be respectively ['grɪnstən] and ['rɪzbənd]. Not many people have much occasion to use either word nowadays; consequently, the older tradition has been lost, and the words now have secondary stress and full vowels instead of [ə] in their last elements. The same thing has happened to *waistcoat*, now usually ['west,kot]; the traditional ['wɛskət] has become old-fashioned. Lack of familiarity can hardly explain the new analysis of *forehead* as ['for,hed] rather than the traditional ['fɔrəd]; consciousness of the spelling is responsible.

AMALGAMATED COMPOUNDS

The phonetic changes we have been considering have the effect of welding the elements of certain compounds so closely together that, judging from sound (and frequently also from their appearances when written), one would sometimes not suspect that they were indeed compounds. In *daisy*, for instance, phonetic reduction of the final element has caused that element to be identical with the suffix -y. Geoffrey Chaucer was quite correct when he referred to “The dayesyë, or elles the yë [eye] of day” in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, for the word is really from the Old English compound *dægesēage* ‘day’s eye.’ The -y of *daisy* is thus not an affix like the diminutive -y of *Katy* or the -y from Old English -ig of *hazy*; instead, the word is from a historical point of view a compound.

Such closely welded compounds were called **amalgamated** by Arthur G. Kennedy (*Current English* 350), who lists, among a good many others, *as* (OE *eal* ‘all’ + *swā* ‘so’), *garlic* (OE *gār* ‘spear’ + *lēac* ‘leek’), *hussy* (OE *hūs* ‘house’ + *wīf* ‘woman, wife’), *lord* (OE *hlāf* ‘loaf’ + *weard* ‘guardian’), *marshal* (OE *mearh* ‘horse’ + *sealc* ‘servant’), *nostril* (OE *nosu* ‘nose’ + *pyrel* ‘hole’), and *sheriff* (OE *scīr* ‘shire’ + (ge)rēfa ‘reeve’). Many proper names are such amalgamated compounds—for instance, among place names, *Boston* (‘Botulf’s stone’), *Bewley* (Fr. *beau* ‘beautiful’ + *lieu* ‘place’), *Sussex* (OE *sūþ* ‘south’ + *Seaxe* ‘Saxons’; compare *Essex* and *Middlesex*), and *Norwich* (OE *norþ* ‘north’ + *wīc* ‘village’). *Norwich* is traditionally pronounced to rime with *porridge*, as in a nursery jingle about a man from Norwich who ate some porridge; the name of the city in Connecticut is, however, pronounced as the spelling seems to indicate. The reader will find plenty of other interesting examples in Eilert Ekwall’s *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*. It is similar with surnames (which are, of course, sometimes place names as well)—for instance, *Durward* (OE *duru* ‘door’ + *weard* ‘keeper’), *Purdue* (Fr. *pour* ‘for’ + *Dieu* ‘God’), and *Thurston* (‘Thor’s stone,’ ultimately Scandinavian); and with a good many given names as well—for instance, *Ethelbert* (OE *æðel* ‘noble’ + *beorht* ‘bright’), *Alfred* (OE *ælf* ‘elf’ + *ræd* ‘counsel’), and *Mildred* (OE *milde* ‘mild’ + *þryþ* ‘strength’).

FUNCTION AND FORM OF COMPOUNDS

The making of a compound is inhibited by few considerations other than those dictated by meaning. A compound may be used in any grammatical function: as noun (*wishbone*), pronoun (*anyone*), adjective (*foolproof*), adverb (*overhead*), verb (*gainsay*), conjunction (*whenever*), or preposition (*without*). It may be made up of two nouns (*baseball*, *mudguard*, *manhole*); of an adjective followed by a noun (*bluegrass*, *madman*, *first-rate*); of a noun followed by an adjective or a participle (*bloodthirsty*, *trigger-happy*, *homemade*, *heartbreaking*, *time-honored*); of a verb followed by an adverb (*pinup*, *breakdown*, *setback*, *cookout*, *sit-in*); of an adverb followed by a verb form (*upset*, *downcast*, *forerun*); of a verb followed by a noun that is its object (*daredevil*, *blowgun*, *touch-me-not*); of a noun followed by a verb (*hemstitch*, *pan-fry*, *typeset*); of two verbs (*can-do*, *look-see*, *stir-fry*); of an adverb followed by an adjective or a participle (*overanxious*, *oncoming*, *well-known*, *uptight*); of a preposition followed by its object (*overland*, *indoors*); or of a participle followed by an adverb (*washed-up*, *carryings-on*, *worn-out*). Some compounds are welded-together phrases: *will-o'-the-wisp*, *happy-go-lucky*, *mother-in-law*, *tongue-in-cheek*, *hand-to-mouth*, and *lighter-than-air*. Many compounds are made of adjective plus noun plus the ending *-ed*—for example, *baldheaded*, *dimwitted*, and *hairy-chested*—and some of noun plus noun plus *-ed*—for example, *pigheaded* and *snowcapped*.

COMBINING WORD PARTS: AFFIXING

AFFIXES FROM OLD ENGLISH

Another type of combining is **affixation**, the use of prefixes and suffixes. Many affixes were at one time independent words, like the insignificant-seeming *a-* of *aside*, *alive*, *aboard*, and *a-hunting*, which was earlier *on* but lost its *-n*, just as *an* did when unstressed and followed by a consonant (122). Another is the *-ly* of many adjectives, like *manly*, *godly*, and *homely*, which developed from Old English *līc* ‘body.’ When so used, *līc* (which became *lic* and eventually *-ly* through lack of stress) originally meant something like ‘having the body or appearance of’: thus the literal meaning of *manly* is ‘having the body or form of a man.’ Old English regularly added *-e* to adjectives to make adverbs of them (98–9)—thus *riht* ‘right,’ *rihte* ‘rightly.’ Adjectives formed with *-lic* acquired adverbial forms in exactly the same way—thus *cræftlic* ‘skillful,’ *cræftlice* ‘skillfully.’ With the late Middle English loss of both final *-e* and final unstressed *-ch*, earlier Middle English *-lich* and *-liche* fell together as *-li* (*-ly*). Because of these losses, we do not ordinarily associate Modern English *-ly* with *like*, the Northern dialect form of the full word that ultimately was to prevail in all dialects of English. In Modern English the full form has been used again as a suffix—history thus repeating itself—as in *gentlemanlike* and *godlike*, beside *gentlemanly* and *godly*.

Other prefixes surviving from Old English times include the following:

AFTER-: as in *aftermath*, *aftereffect*, *afternoon*

BE-: the unstressed form of *by* (OE *bī*), as in *believe*, *beneath*, *beyond*, *behalf*, *between*

FOR-: either intensifying, as in *forlorn*, or negating, as in *forbid*, *forswear*

MIS-: as in *misdeed, misalign, mispronounce*

OUT-: Old English *ūt-*, as in *outside, outfield, outgo*

UN-: for an opposite or negative meaning, as in *undress, undo, unafraid, un-English; uncola* was originally an advertising slogan for the soft drink 7 Up as an alternative to colas but was metaphorically extended in “France [wants] to become the world’s next great ‘Uncola,’ the leader of the alternative coalition to American power.” (*NY Times*, Feb. 26, 2003)

UNDER-: as in *understand, undertake, underworld*

UP-: as in *upright, upheaval, upkeep*

WITH-: ‘against,’ as in *withhold, withstand, withdraw*

Other suffixes that go back at least to Old English times are the following:

-DOM: Old English *dōm*, earlier an independent word that has developed into *doom*, in Old English meaning ‘judgment, statute,’ that is, ‘what is set,’ and related to *do*; as in *freedom, filmdom, kingdom*

-ED: used to form adjectives from nouns, as in *storied, crabbed, bowlegged*

-EN: also to form adjectives, as in *golden, oaken, leaden*

-ER: Old English *-ere*, to form nouns of agency, as in *singer, baby sitter, do-gooder*, a suffix that, when it occurs in loanwords—for instance, *butler* (from Anglo-French *butuiller* ‘bottler, manservant having to do with wines and liquors’) and *butcher* (from Old French, literally ‘dealer in flesh of billy goats’)—goes back to Latin *-ārius*, but that is nevertheless cognate with the English ending

-FUL: to form adjectives, as in *baleful, sinful, wonderful*, and, with secondary stress, to form nouns as well, as in *handful, mouthful, spoonful*

-HOOD: Old English *-hād*, as in *childhood* and *priesthood*, earlier an independent word meaning ‘condition, quality’

-ING: Old English *-ung* or *-ing*, to form verbal nouns, as in *reading*

-ISH: Old English *-isc*, to form adjectives, as in *English* and *childish*

-LESS: Old English *-lēas* ‘free from’ (also used independently and cognate with *loose*), as in *wordless, reckless, hopeless*

-NESS: to form abstract nouns from many adjectives (and some participles), as in *friendliness, learnedness, obligingness*

-SHIP: Old English *-scipe*, to form abstract nouns, as in *lordship, fellowship, worship* (that is, ‘worth-ship’)

-SOME: Old English *-sum*, to form adjectives, as in *lonesome, wholesome, winsome* (OE *wynn* ‘joy’ + *sum*)

-STER: Old English *-estre*, originally feminine, as in *spinster* ‘female spinner’ and *webster* ‘female weaver,’ but later losing all sexual connotation, as in *gangster* and *speedster*

-TH: to form abstract nouns, as in *health, depth, sloth*

-WARD: as in *homeward, toward, outward*

-Y: Old English *-ig*, to form adjectives as in *thirsty, greedy, bloody*

There are several homonymous -y suffixes in addition to the one of Old English origin. The diminutive -y (or -ie) of *Kitty, Jackie*, and *baby* is from another source and occurs first in Middle English times. It is still available for forming new

diminutives, just as we continue to form adjectives with the *-y* from Old English *-ig*—for example, *jazzy*, *loony*, *iffy*. The *-y*'s in loanwords from Greek (*phlebotomy*), Latin (*century*), and French (*contrary*, *perjury*, *army*) cannot be extended to new words.

Many affixes from Old English may still be used to create new words. They may be affixed to nonnative words, as in *mispronounce*, *obligingness*, *czardom*, *pocketful*, *Romish*, *coffeless*, *orderly* (*-liness*), and *sugary* (*-ish*). Other affixes, very common in Old English, have survived only as fossils, like *ge-* in *enough* (OE *genōg*, *genōh*), *afford* (OE *gefordian*), *aware* (OE *gewær*), *handiwork* (OE *handgeweorc*), and *either* (OE *ægðer*, a contracted form of *æg[e]hwæðer*). *And-* 'against, toward,' the English cognate of Latin *anti-*, survives only in *answer* (OE *andswaru*, literally 'a swearing against') and, in unstressed form with loss of both *n* and *d*, in *along* (OE *andlang*).

AFFIXES FROM OTHER LANGUAGES

The languages with which English has had closest cultural contacts—Latin, Greek, and French—have supplied a number of affixes freely used to make new English words. One of the most common is Greek *anti-* 'against,' which, in addition to long-established learned words like *antipathy*, *antidote*, and *anticlimax*, since the seventeenth century has been used in many American creations—for instance, *anti-Federalist*, *anti-Catholic*, *antitobacco*, *antislavery*, *antisaloon*, *antiaircraft*, and *antiabortion*. *Pro-* 'for' has been somewhat less productive. *Super-*, as in *superman*, *supermarket*, and *superhighway*, has even become an informal adjective, as in "Our new car's super"; there is also a reduplicated form *superduper* 'very super.' Other foreign prefixes are *ante-*, *de-*, *dis-*, *ex-*, *inter-*, *multi-*, *neo-*, *non-*, *post-*, *pre-*, *pseudo-*, *re-*, *semi-*, *sub-*, and *ultra-*. Even rare foreign prefixes like *eu-* ('good' from Greek) have novel uses; J. R. R. Tolkien invented *eucatastrophe* as an impressive term for 'happy ending.'

Borrowed suffixes that have been added to English words (whatever their ultimate origin) include the following:

- ESE: Latin *-ēnsis* by way of Old French, as in *federalese*, *journalese*, *educationese*
- (I)AN: Latin *-(i)ānus*, used to form adjectives from nouns, as in *Nebraskan*, *Miltonian*
- (I)ANA: from the neuter plural of the same Latin ending, which has a limited use nowadays in forming nouns from other nouns, as in *Americana*, *Menckenianna*
- ICIAN: Latin *-ic-* + *-iānus*, as in *beautician*, *mortician*
- IZE: Greek *-izein*, a very popular suffix for making verbs, as in *pasteurize*, *criticize*, *harmonize*
- OR: Latin, as in *chiropractor* and *realtor*
- ORIUM: Latin, *pastorium* 'Baptist parsonage,' *crematorium* 'place used for cremation,' *cryotorium* 'place where frozen dead are stored until science can reanimate them'

One of the most used of borrowed suffixes is *-al* (Lat. *-alis*), which makes adjectives from nouns, as in *doctoral*, *fusional*, *hormonal*, and *tidal*. The continued

productivity of that suffix can be seen in the decree of a chief censor for the NBC television network: “No frontal nudity, no backal nudity, and no sidal nudity.”

VOGUISH AFFIXES

Though no one can say why—probably just fashion—certain affixes have been popular during certain periods. For instance, *-wise* affixed to nouns and adjectives to form adverbs, such as *likewise*, *lengthwise*, *otherwise*, and *crosswise*, was practically archaic until approximately the 1940s. The OED cites a few new examples in modern times—for instance, *Cardinal-wise* (1677), *festoonwise* (1743), and *Timothy-* or *Titus-wise* (1876). But around 1940 a mighty proliferation of words in *-wise* began—for instance, *budgetwise*, *saleswise*, *weatherwise*, *healthwise*—and hundreds of others continued to be invented: *drugwise*, *personalitywise*, *security-wise*, *timewise*, *salarywise*, and *fringe-benefitwise*. Such coinages are useful additions to the language because they are more concise than phrases with *in respect of* or *in the manner of*.

Type has enjoyed a similar vogue and is freely used as a suffix. It forms adjectives from nouns, as in “Catholic-type bishops” and “a Las Vegas-type revue.” Like *-wise*, *-type* is also economical, enabling us to shortcut such locutions as *bishops of the Catholic type* and *a revue of the Las Vegas type*.

The suffix *-ize*, listed above, has had a centuries-old life as a means of making verbs from nouns and adjectives, not only in English, but in other languages as well—for instance, French *-iser*, Italian *-izare*, Spanish *-izar*, and German *-isieren*. Many English words with this suffix are borrowings from French—for instance (with *z* for French *s*), *authorize*, *moralize*, *naturalize*; others are English formations (though some of them may have parallel formations in French)—for instance, *concertize*, *patronize*, *fertilize*; still others are formed from proper names—for instance, *bowdlerize*, *mesmerize*, *Americanize*. In the last half century, many new creations have come into being, such as *accessorize*, *moisturize*, *sanitize*, *glamorize*, and *tenderize*. *Finalize* descended to general use from the celestial mists of bureaucracy, business, and industry, where nothing is merely ended, finished, or concluded. It is a great favorite of administrators of all kinds and sizes—including the academic.

In Greek, nouns of action were formed with the ending *-ismos* or *-isma*, as in the loanwords *ostracism* and *criticism*. New uses of the suffix *-ism* have developed in English. The prejudice implied in *racism* has extended to *sexism*, *ageism*, and *speciesism* ‘human treatment of other animals as mere objects.’ Other popular derivatives are *Me-ism* ‘selfishness,’ *foodism* ‘gluttony,’ *volunteerism* ‘donated service,’ and *presidentialism* ‘respect for and confidence in the office of president.’ The suffix *-ism* is even used as an independent word, as in “creeds and *isms*.” The suffix *-ology* has also been so used to mean ‘science,’ as in “Chemistry, Geology, Philology, and a hundred other *ologies*.” The prefixes *anti-*, *pro-*, *con-*, and *ex-*, are likewise used as independent words.

De-, a prefix of Latin origin with negative force, is much alive. Though many words beginning with it are from Latin or French, it has for centuries been used to form new English words. Noah Webster first used *demoralize* and claimed to have coined it, though it could just as well be from French *démoraliser*. Other creations

with the prefix are *defrost*, *dewax*, *debunk*, and more pompous specimens such as *debureaucratize*, *dewater*, *deinsectize*, and *deratizate* ‘get rid of rats.’ Two other more familiar words are *decontaminate* and *dehumidify*, pompous ways of saying ‘purify’ and ‘dry out.’ A somewhat different sense of the prefix in *debark* has led to *debus*, *detrain*, and *deplane*. *Dis-*, likewise from Latin, is also freely used in a negative function, particularly in officialese, as in *disincentive* ‘deterrent,’ *disassemble* ‘take apart,’ and *dissaver* ‘one who does not save money.’

Perhaps as a result of an ecologically motivated decision that smaller is better, the prefix *mini-* enjoys maxi use. Among the new combinations into which it has entered are *mini black holes*, *minicar* and *minibus*, *minicam* ‘miniature camera,’ the seemingly contradictory *miniconglomerate* and *minimogul*, *minilecture*, *mini-mall*, and *minirevolution*. The form *mini*, which is a short version of *miniature*, came to be used as an independent adjective, and even acquired a comparative form, as in a *New Yorker* magazine report, “Fortunately, the curator of ornithology decided to give another talk, mini-er than the first.” Despite ecological respect for *mini-*, the *minicinema* has given way to the *Theater Max*, whose second term is a mini version of *mini*’s antonym, *maxi*.

Another voguish affix is *non-*, from Latin, as in *nonsick* ‘healthy’ and *non-availability* ‘lack.’ *Non-* has also developed two new uses: first, to indicate a scornful attitude toward the thing denoted by the main word, as in *nonbook* ‘book not intended for normal reading, such as a coffee-table art book’; and second, to indicate that the person or object denoted by the main word is dissimulating or has been disguised, as in *noncandidate* ‘candidate who pretends not to be running for office.’ Others are *-ee*, from French, as in *hijackee*, *hiree* ‘new employee,’ *mentee* ‘person receiving the attention of a mentor,’ *returnee* ‘returner,’ and *trustee*; and *re-*, from Latin, as in *re-decontaminate* ‘purify again,’ *recivilianize* ‘return to civilian life,’ and *recondition* ‘repair, restore.’ The scientific suffix *-on*, from Greek, has been widely used in recent years to name newly discovered substances like *interferon* in the human bloodstream and posited subatomic particles like the *gluon* and the *graviton*. Perhaps an extension of the *-s* in disease names like *measles* and *shingles* has supplied the ending of words like *dumbs* and *smarts*, as in “The administration has been stricken with a long-term case of dumbs” and “He’s got street-smarts” (that is, ‘is knowledgeable about the ways of life in the streets’).

Another recent suffix is *-nik*, from Yiddish *nudnik*, reinforced by Russian *sput-nik*. It is often derogatory: *beatnik*, *no-goodnik*, *peacenik* ‘pacifist,’ *foundation-nik* ‘officer of a foundation,’ and *refusednik* ‘person denied a visa to enter or leave Russia.’ Of uncertain origin, but perhaps combining the ending of such Spanish words as *amigo*, *chicano*, and *gringo* with the English exclamation *oh*, is an informal suffix used to make nouns like *ammo*, *cheapo* ‘stingy person,’ *combo*, *daddy-o*, *kiddo*, *politico*, *sicko* ‘psychologically unstable person,’ *supremo* ‘leader,’ *weirdo*, *wrongo* ‘mistake’; adjectives like *blotto* ‘drunk,’ *sleazo* ‘sleazy,’ *socko* and *boffo* ‘highly successful,’ and *stinko*; and exclamations like *cheerio* and *righto*. Equally voguish are a number of affixes created by a process of blending: *agri-*, *docu-*, *e-*, *Euro-*, *petro-*, and *syn-*; *-aholic*, *-ateria*, *-gate*, *-rama*, and *-thon*. Such affixes and the process through which they come into being are discussed below under “Blending Words.”

SHORTENING WORDS

CLIPPED FORMS

A **clipped form** is a shortening of a longer word that sometimes supplants the latter altogether. Thus, *mob* supplanted *mobile vulgus* ‘movable, or fickle, common people’; and *omnibus*, in the sense ‘motor vehicle for paying passengers,’ is almost as archaic as *mobile vulgus*, having been clipped to *bus*. The clipping of *omnibus*, literally ‘for all,’ is a strange one because *bus* is merely part of the dative plural ending *-ibus* of the Latin pronoun *omnis* ‘all.’ *Periwig*, like the form *peruke* (Fr. *perruque*), of which it is a modification, is completely gone; only the abbreviated *wig* survives, and few are likely to be aware of the full form. *Taxicab* has completely superseded *taximeter cabriolet* and has, in turn, supplied us with two new words, *taxi* and *cab*. As a shortening of *cabriolet*, *cab* is almost a century older than *taxicab*. *Pantaloons* is quite archaic. The clipped form *pants* has won the day completely. *Bra* has similarly replaced *brassiere*, which in French means a shoulder strap (derived from *bras* ‘arm’) or a bodice fitted with such straps.

Other abbreviated forms more commonly used than the longer ones include *phone*, *zoo*, *extra*, *flu*, *auto*, and *ad*. *Zoo* is from *zoological garden* with the pronunciation [zu] from the spelling, a pronunciation now sometimes extended back to the longer form as [zuə-] rather than the traditional [zoə-]. *Extra*, which is probably a clipping from *extraordinary*, has become a separate word. *Auto*, like the full form *automobile*, is rapidly losing ground to *car*, an abbreviated form of *motorcar*. In time *auto* may become archaic. *Advertisement* became *ad* in America but was clipped less drastically to *advert* in Britain, though *ad* is now frequent there. *Razz*, a clipped form of *raspberry* ‘Bronx cheer’ used as either noun or verb, is doubtless more frequent than the full form.

Later clippings of nouns are *bio* (*biography*, *biographical sketch*), *fax* (*facsimile*), *high tech*, *perk* (*perquisite*), *photo op* (*photographic opportunity*), *prenup* (*pre-nuptial agreement*), *soap* (*soap opera*), *telecom* (*telecommunications*), and *blog*, also a verb (from *web-log*, perhaps reinterpreted as *we-blog* from the fact that some weblogs were communal projects). Clipped adjectives are *op-ed* ‘pertaining to the page opposite the editorial page, on which syndicated columns and other “think pieces” are printed’ and *pop*, derived from *popular*, as in “pop culture,” “pop art,” and “pop sociology.” *Hype*, used as either a noun ‘advertising, publicity stunt’ or a verb ‘stimulate artificially, promote,’ is apparently a clipping of *hypo*, which, in turn, is a clipping of *hypodermic needle*, thus reflecting the influence of the drug subculture on Madison Avenue and hence on the rest of us. Another clipped verb is *rehab*, from *rehabilitate*, as in “Young people are rehabbing a lot of the old houses in the inner city,” also used as a noun.

As the foregoing examples illustrate, clipping can shorten a form by cutting between words (*soap opera* > *soap*) or between morphemes (*biography* > *bio*). But it often ignores lexical and morphemic boundaries and cuts instead in the middle of a morpheme (*popular* > *pop*, *rehabilitate* > *rehab*). In so doing, it creates new morphemes and thus enriches the stock of potential building material for making other words. In *helicopter*, the *-o-* is the combining element between Greek *helic-* (the stem of *helix*, as in the *double helix* structure of DNA) ‘spiral’ and *pter(on)* ‘wing,’

but the word has been reanalyzed as *heli-copter* rather than as *helic-o-pter*, thus producing *copter* and *heliport* ‘terminal for helicopters.’

INITIALISMS: ALPHABETISMS AND ACRONYMS

An extreme kind of clipping is the use of the initial letters of words (*HIV*, *YMCA*), or sometimes of syllables (*TB*, *TV*, *PJs* ‘pajamas’), as words. Usually the motive for this clipping is either brevity or catchiness, though sometimes euphemism may be involved, as with old-fashioned *BO*, *BM*, and *VD*. Perhaps *TB* also was euphemistic in the beginning, when the disease was a much direr threat to life than it now is and its very name was uttered in hushed tones. When such **initialisms** are pronounced with the names of the letters of the alphabet, they are called **alphabetisms**. Other examples are *CD* ‘compact disk’ and *HOV* ‘high occupancy vehicle’ (of a highway lane).

One of the oldest English alphabetisms, and by far the most successful one, is *OK*. Allen Walker Read traced the history of the form to 1839, showing that it originated as a clipping of *oll korrekt*, a playful misspelling that was part of a fad for orthographic jokes and abbreviations. It was then used as a pun on *Old Kinderhook*, the nickname of Martin Van Buren during his political campaign of 1840. Efforts to trace the word to more exotic sources—including Finnish, Choctaw, Burmese, Greek, and more recently African languages—have been unsuccessful but will doubtless continue to challenge the ingenuity of amateur etymologists.

It is inevitable that it should have dawned on some waggish genius that the initial letters of words in certain combinations frequently made a pronounceable sequence of letters. Thus, the abbreviation for the military phrase *absent without official leave*, *AWOL*, came to be pronounced not only as a sequence of the four letter names, but also as though they were the spelling for an ordinary word, *awol* [‘e,wɔl]. It was, of course, even better if the initials spelled out an already existing word, as those of *white Anglo-Saxon Protestant* spell out *Wasp*. There had to be a learned term to designate such words, and **acronym** was coined from Greek *akros* ‘tip’ and *onyma* ‘name,’ by analogy with *homonym*. There are also mixed examples in which the two systems of pronunciation are combined—for example, *VP* ‘Vice President’ pronounced and sometimes spelled *veep* and *ROTC* ‘Reserve Officers Training Corps’ pronounced like “rotcy.”

The British seem to have beaten Americans to the discovery of the joys of making acronyms, even though the impressively learned term to designate what is essentially a letters game was probably born in America. In any case, as early as World War I days, the Defence [sic, in British spelling] of the Realm Act was called *Dora* and members of the Women’s Royal Naval Service were called (with the insertion of a vowel) *Wrens*. *Wrens* inspired the World War II American *Wac* (Women’s Army Corps) and a number of others—our happiest being *Spar* ‘woman Coast Guard,’ from the motto of the U.S. Coast Guard, *Semper Paratus*.

The euphemistic *fu* words—the most widely known is *snafu*—are also among the acronymic progeny of World War II. Less well known today are *snafu*’s humorous comparative, *tarfu* ‘things are really fouled up,’ and superlative, *fubar* ‘fouled up beyond all recognition’ (to use the euphemism to which *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* had recourse in etymologizing *snafu* as ‘situation normal all fouled up’). Initialisms are sometimes useful in avoiding taboo terms, the shortest

and probably best-known example being *f-word*, on the etymology of whose referent Allen Walker Read published an early article, “An Obscenity Symbol,” without ever using the word in question.

The acronymic process has sometimes been reversed or at least conflated; for example, *Waves*, which resembles a genuine acronym, most likely preceded or accompanied the origin of its phony-sounding source, Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (in the Navy). That is, to ensure a good match, the creation of the acronym and the phrase it stands for were simultaneous. The following are also probably reverse acronyms: *JOBS* (Job Opportunities in the Business Sector), *NOW* (National Organization for Women), and *ZIP* (Zone Improvement Plan).

Acronyms lend themselves to humorous uses. *Bomfog* has been coined as a term for the platitudes and pieties that candidates for public office are wont to utter; it stands for ‘Brotherhood of Man, Fatherhood of God.’ *Yuppie* is from ‘young urban professional’ + *-ie*. *Wysiwyg* [ˈwɪzi,wɪɡ] is a waggish computer term from ‘What you see is *what* you get,’ denoting a monitor display that is identical in appearance with the corresponding printout. Another is *gigo* for ‘garbage in, garbage out,’ reminding us that what a computer puts out is no better than what we put in it. The Internet has spawned a massive number of such initialisms used as an esoteric code among the initiated, such as *IM* ‘instant messaging,’ *imho* ‘in my humble opinion,’ *bfn* ‘bye for now,’ and *lol* ‘laughing out loud.’

Other initialisms are used in full seriousness and have become part of the everyday lives of millions of Americans. For example, people do their *IMing* (Instant Messaging) while driving their *RVs* (recreational vehicles, such as “motor homes”) or *SUVs* (sport-utility vehicles). Even more serious is the *SWAT* (special weapons and tactics) team or force, deployed in highly dangerous police assignments such as flushing out snipers. When astronauts first reached the moon, they traveled across its surface in a *lem* (lunar excursion module). Other technical acronyms are *radar* (radio detecting and ranging) and *laser* (light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation). Now we are concerned with alphabetisms like *DNA* (deoxyribonucleic acid) and *DVD* (digital video disc) and with acronyms like *NASA* (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), *PAC* (political action committee), and *DWEM* (dead white European male).

APHERETIC AND APHETIC FORMS

A special type of clipping, **apheresis** (or for the highly learned, *aphaeresis*), is the omission of sounds from the beginning of a word, as in childish “‘Scuse me” and “I did it ‘cause I wanted to.” Frequently this phenomenon has resulted in two different words—for instance, *fender-defender*, *fence-defense*, and *sport-disport*—in which the first member of each pair is simply an **apheretic form** of the second. The meanings of *etiquette* and its apheretic form *ticket* have become rather sharply differentiated, the primary meaning of French *etiquette* being preserved in the English shortening. Sometimes, however, an apheretic form is merely a variant of the longer form—for instance, *possum-opossum* and *coon-raccoon*.

When a single sound is omitted at the beginning of a word and that sound is an unstressed vowel, we have a special variety of apheresis called **aphesis**. Aphesis is a phonological process in that it results from lack of stress on the elided vowel. Examples are *cute-acute*, *squire-esquire*, and *lone-alone*.

BACK-FORMATIONS

Back-formation is the making of a new word from an older word that is mistakenly assumed to be a derivative of it, as in *to burgle* from *burglar*, the final *ar* of which suggests that the word is a noun of agency and hence ought to mean ‘one who burgles.’ The facetious *to ush* from *usher* and *to buttle* from *butler* are similar.

Pease (an obsolete form of the word *pea*, as in the “pease porridge” of a nursery rhyme) has a final consonant [-z], which is not, as it seems to the ear to be, the English plural suffix -s; it is, in fact, not a suffix at all but merely the last sound of the word (OE *pise*). But by the seventeenth century *pease* was mistaken for a plural, and a new singular, *pea*, was derived from a word that was itself singular, precisely as if we were to derive a form **chee* from *cheese* under the impression that *cheese* was plural; then we should have *one chee*, *two chees*, just as we now have *one pea*, *two peas*. *Cherry* has been derived by an identical process from Anglo-French *cherise*, the final [s] having been assumed to be the plural suffix. Similarly, *sherry wine* was once *sherris wine*, named for the city in Spain where the wine was originally made, Xeres (now Jerez). (In Spanish *x* formerly had the value [š], so the English spelling was perfectly phonetic.) Similarly, the wonderful one-hoss *shay* of Oliver Wendell Holmes’s poem was so called because of the notion that *chaise* was a plural form, and the *Chinee* of a Bret Harte poem is similarly explained.

Other nouns in the singular that look like plural forms are *alms* (OE *ælmysse*, from Lat. *eleēmosyna*), *riches* (ME *richesse* ‘wealth’), and *molasses*. The first two are in fact now construed as plurals. Nonstandard *those molasses* assumes the existence of a singular *that *molass*, though such a form is not indeed heard. People who sell women’s hose, however, sometimes refer to a “very nice hoe,” and salesclerks for men’s clothing to “a fine pant” instead of “pair of pants.” When television talk-show host Johnny Carson responded to a single handclap with, “That was a wonderful applaw,” his joke reflected the same tendency in English that leads to the serious use of *kudo* as a new singular for *kudos*, although the latter, a loanword from Greek, is singular itself.

The adverb *darkling* ‘in the darkness’ (*dark* + adverbial *-ling*, an Old English suffix for direction or manner) has been misunderstood as a present participial form, giving rise to a new verb *darkle*, as in Lord Byron’s “Her cheek began to flush, her eyes to sparkle, / And her proud brow’s blue veins to swell and darkle” (*Don Juan*), in which *darkle* means ‘to grow dark.’ Keats had earlier used *darkling* with its historical adverbial sense in his “Ode to a Nightingale”: “Darkling I listen; and, for many a time, / I have been half in love with easeful Death.” This is not to say that Byron misunderstood Keats’s line; it merely shows how easily the verb developed as a back-formation from the adverb. *Grovel*, the first recorded use of which is by Shakespeare, comes to us by way of a similar misconception of *groveling* (*grufe* ‘face down’ + *-ling*), and *sidle* is likewise from *sideling* ‘sidelong.’ A joking use of *-ing* as a participial ending occurs in J. K. Stephen’s immortal “When the Rudyard’s cease from Kipling, / And the Haggards ride no more.” There is a similar play in “Do you like Kipling?” “I don’t know—I’ve never kipped.”

In some back-formations, the derived form could just as well have been the original one. *Typewriter*, of American origin, came before the verb *typewrite*; nevertheless, the ending *-er* of *typewriter* is actually a noun-of-agency ending (early *typewriter* referred to either the machine or its operator), so the verb could just as

well have come first, only it didn't. It is similar with *housekeep* from *housekeeper* (or *housekeeping*), *baby-sit* from *baby sitter*, and *bargain-hunt* from *bargain hunter*. The adjective *housebroken* 'excretorily adapted to the indoors' is older than the verb *housebreak*; but, since *housebroken* is actually a compounding of *house* and the past participle *broken*, the process might just as well have been the other way around—but it wasn't.

BLENDING WORDS

The blending of two existing words to make a new word was doubtless an unconscious process in the oldest periods of our language. *Hapel* 'nobleman' in the fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is apparently a blend of *apel* (OE *æpele* 'noble') and *haleþ* (OE *hæleþ* 'man'). Other early examples, with the dates of their earliest occurrence as given in the OED, are *flush* (*flash* + *gush*) [1548]; *twirl* (*twist* + *whirl*) [1598]; *dumfound* (apparently *dumb* + *confound*) [1653]; and *flurry* (*flutter* + *hurry*) [1698].

Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) made a great thing of such **blends**, which he called **portmanteau words**, particularly in his "Jabberwocky" poem. A portmanteau (from French *porter* 'to carry' + *manteau* 'mantle') was a term for a large suitcase with two halves that opened like a book on a center hinge. Carroll said that blend words are like that: they contain "two meanings packed up into one word." Several of his creations—*chortle* (*chuckle* + *snort*), *galumph* (*gallop* + *triumph*), and *snark* (*snake* + *shark*)—have found their way into dictionaries. The author of *Alice through the Looking Glass* had an endearing passion for seeing things backwards, as indicated by his pen name: *Carolus* is the Latin equivalent of *Charles*, and *Lutwidge* must have suggested to him German *Ludwig*, the equivalent of English *Lewis*. *Charles Lutwidge* thus became (in reverse) *Lewis Carroll*.

Among the most successful of blends are *smog* (*smoke* + *fog*) and *motel* (*motor* + *hotel*). *Urinalysis* (*urine* + *analysis*) first appeared in 1889 and has since attained to scientific respectability, as have the more recent *quasar* (*quasi* + *stellar* [object]) and *pulsar* (*pulse* + *quasar*). *Cafetorium* (*cafeteria* + *auditorium*) has made considerable headway in the American public school systems for a large room with the double purpose indicated by it. Boy Scouts have *camporees* (*camp* + *jamboree*), and a favorite Sunday meal is *brunch* (*breakfast* + *lunch*). Other recent blends are *e-tail* (*e-* 'electronic' + *retail*), *modem* (*modulator* + *demodulator*), *nutraceutical* (*nutrition* + *pharmaceutical*), and *webisode* 'episode of a TV serial program broadcast on the World Wide Web.'

Blends are easy to create, which is doubtless why they are so popular and numerous. Science fiction readers and writers get in touch with one another through the *fanzine* (*fan* + *magazine*). Changes in sexual mores have given rise to *palimony* (*pal* + *alimony*) for unmarried ex-partners, and *sexploitation* is the response of the entertainment industry to freedom of choice.

NEW MORPHEMES FROM BLENDING

Blending can, and frequently does, create new morphemes or give new meanings to old ones. For instance, in German *Hamburger* 'pertaining to, or associated with, Hamburg,' the *-er* is affixed to the name of the city. This adjectival suffix may be

joined to any place name in German—for example, *Braunschweiger Wurst* ‘Brunswick sausage,’ *Wiener Schnitzel* ‘Vienna cutlet,’ and the like. In English, however, the word *hamburger* was blended so often with other words (*cheeseburger* being the chief example, but also *steak burger*, *chicken burger*, *veggie burger*, and a host of others) that *burger* came to be used as an independent word for a sandwich containing some kind of patty. A similar culinary example is the *eggwich* and the commercially promoted *Spamwich*, which have not so far, however, made *-wich* into an independent word.

Automobile, taken from French, was originally a combination of Greek *autos* ‘self’ (also in *autohypnosis*, *autograph*, *autobiography*) and Latin *mobilis* ‘movable.’ Then *automobile* was blended to produce new forms like *autocar*, *autobus*, and *auto-camp*. The result is a new word, *auto*, with a meaning quite different from that of the original combining form. One of the new blendings, *autocade*, has the ending of *cavalcade*, which also appears in *aquacade*, *motorcade*, and *tractorcade*, with the sense of *-cade* as either ‘pageant’ or ‘procession.’ The second element of *automobile* has acquired a combining function as well, as in *bookmobile* ‘library on wheels’ and *bloodmobile* ‘blood bank on wheels.’

Productive new prefixes are *e-* from *electronic*, as in *e-mail*, *e-business*, *e-commerce*, *e-ticket* (on an airline); *eco-* from *ecology*, as in *ecofreak*, *ecosphere*, *ecotourism*; and *bio-* from *biological*, as in *biocontrol*, *bioethics*, *biotechnology*. Another new morpheme created by blending is *-holic* ‘addict, one who habitually does or uses’ whatever the first part of the word denotes, as in *credaholic* (from *credit*), *chocoholic* (from *chocolate*), *pokerholic*, *potatochipoholic*, *punaholic*, *sexaholic*, *sleepaholic*, *spendaholic*, and the most frequent of such trivia, *workaholic*. Yet another is *-thon* ‘group activity lasting for an extended time and designed to raise money for a charitable cause,’ the tail end of *marathon*, whence the notion of endurance in such charitable affairs as a *showerthon* (during which students took turns showering for 360 continuous hours to raise money for the American Cancer Society), *fastathon* (in which young people fasted for 30 hours to raise money for the needy), and *cakethon* (a five-hour auction of homemade cakes for the Heart Association), as well as *bikeathon*, *Putt-Putt-athon* (from *Putt-Putt* ‘commercial miniature golf’), *quiltathon*, *radiothon*, *teeter-totter-athon*, and *wakeathon*.

An old morpheme given a new sense by blending is *gate*. After the forced resignation of Richard Nixon from the presidency, the term *Watergate* (the name of the apartment-house and office complex where the events began that led to his downfall) became a symbol for scandal and corruption, usually involving some branch of government and often with official efforts to cover up the facts. In that sense the word was blended with a variety of other terms to produce such new words as *Info-gate*, *Irangate* (also called *Armsgate*, *Contragate*, *Northgate*, and *Reagagate*, both the latter after the two principal persons involved in it), *Koreagate*, *Oilgate*, *Peanutgate*, and many another. Although use of *-gate* began as a topical allusion, the formative shows remarkable staying power. New words made with it continue to appear; for example, *Buckinghamgate* (news leaks from the royal palace) and *papergate* (the writing of bad checks by members of Congress).

FOLK ETYMOLOGY

Folk etymology—the naive misunderstanding of a more or less esoteric word that makes it into something more familiar and hence seems to give it a new etymology, false though it be—is a minor kind of blending. Spanish *cucaracha* ‘wood louse’ has thus been modified to *cockroach*, though the justly unpopular creature so named is neither a cock nor a roach in the earlier sense of the word (that is, a freshwater fish). By the clipping of the term to its second element, *roach* has come to mean what *cucaracha* originally meant.

A neat example of how the folk-etymological process works is furnished by the experience of a German teacher of ballet who attended classes in modern dance at an American university in order to observe American teaching techniques. During one of these classes, she heard a student describe a certain ballet jump, which he referred to as a “soda box.” Genuinely mystified, she inquired about the term. The student who had used it and other members of the class averred that it was precisely what they always said and that it was spelled as they pronounced it—*soda box*. What they had misheard from their instructor was the practically universal ballet term *saut de basque* ‘Basque leap.’ One cannot but wonder how widespread the folk-etymologized term is in American schools of the dance.

A classified advertisement in a college town newspaper read in part “Stove, table & chairs, bed and Chester drawers.” The last named item of furniture is what is more conventionally called a *chest of drawers*, but the pronunciation of that term in fast tempo has led many a hearer to think of it as named for an otherwise unknown person. Children are especially prone to such folk-etymologizing. As a child, one of the original authors of this book misheard *artificial snow* as *Archie Fisher snow*, a plausible enough boner because a prominent merchant of the town was named Archie Fisher and used the stuff in his display windows at Christmas. Similarly, the present author as a child traveled on a rickety old streetcar to Creve Coeur (“heartbreak”) Lake in the countryside and, because the trolley going there made such squeaking noises, he thought the destination was “Creak Car Lake.” Many people can recall such errors from their childhood.

When this sort of misunderstanding of a word becomes widespread, we have acquired a new item in the English lexicon—one that usually completely displaces the old one and frequently seems far more appropriate than the displaced word. Thus *crayfish* seems more fitting than would the normal modern phonetic development of its source, Middle English *crevice*, taken from Old French, which language in turn took it from Old High German *krebiz* ‘crab’ (Modern *Krebs*). *Chaise lounge* for *chaise longue* ‘long chair’ is listed as a variant in *Webster’s Third*, and seems to be on the way to full social respectability. A dealer says that the prevailing pronunciation, of both buyers and sellers, is either [ʃɛz laʊnʃ] or [ʃes laʊnʃ], the first of these in some circles being considered somewhat elite, not to say snobbish, in that it indicates that the user has “had” French. In any case, as far as speakers of English are concerned, the boner is remarkably apt, as indeed are many folk-etymologies. The aptness of a blunder has much to do with its ultimate acceptance.

SHIFTING WORDS TO NEW USES

ONE PART OF SPEECH TO ANOTHER

A very prolific source of new words is the facility of Modern English, because of its paucity of inflection, for converting words from one grammatical function to another with no change in form, a process known as **functional shift**. Thus, the name of practically every part of the body has been converted to use as a verb—one may *head* a committee, *shoulder* or *elbow* one's way through a crowd, *hand* in one's papers, *finger* one's collar, *thumb* a ride, *back* one's car, *leg* it along, *shin* up a tree, *foot* a bill, *toe* a mark, and *tiptoe* through the tulips—without any modification of form such as would be necessary in other languages, such as German, in which the suffix *-(e)n* is a necessary part of all infinitives. It would not have been possible to shift words thus in Old English times either, when infinitives ended in *-(a)n* or *-ian*. But Modern English does it with the greatest ease; to cite a few non-anatomical examples, *to contact*, *to chair* (a meeting), *to telephone*, *to date*, *to impact*, *to park*, *to proposition*, and *to M.C.* (or *emcee*).

Verbs may also be used as nouns. One may, for instance, take a *walk*, a *run*, a *drive*, a *spin*, a *cut*, a *stand*, a *break*, a *turn*, or a *look*. A newer example is *wrap* 'a sandwich made of a soft tortilla rolled around a filling.' Nouns are just as freely used as modifiers: *head bookkeeper*, *handlebar mustache*, *stone wall*, and *designer label*, whence *designer water* 'bottled water.' Adjectives and participles are used as nouns—for instance, *commercial* 'sales spiel on TV or radio,' *formals* 'evening clothes,' *clericals* 'clergyman's street costume,' *devotional* 'short prayer service subsidiary to some other activity,' *private* 'noncommissioned soldier,' *elder*, *painting*, and *earnings*.

Adjectives may also be converted into verbs, as with *better*, *round*, *tame*, and *rough*. Even adverbs and conjunctions are capable of conversion, as in "the *whys* and the *wherefores*," "*but* me no *buts*" (with *but* as verb and noun), and "*ins* and *outs*." The attributive use of *in* and *out*, as in *inpatient* and *outpatient*, is quite old. The adjectival use of *in* meaning 'fashionable' or 'influential,' as in "the *in* thing" and "the *in* group," is recent, however. The adjectival use of the adverb *now* meaning 'of the present time,' as in "the *now* king," dates from the fifteenth century, whereas the meaning 'modern, and hence fashionable,' as in "the *now* generation," is a product of more recent times.

Transitive verbs may be made from older intransitive ones, as has happened fairly recently with *shop* ("*Shop* Our Fabulous Sale Now in Progress"), *sleep* ("Her [a cruising yacht's] designer has claimed that she can *sleep* six"), and *look* ("What are we *looking* here?").

A good many combinations of verbs and adverbs—for instance, *slow down*, *check up*, *fill in* 'furnish with a background sketch,' *break down* 'analyze,' and *set up*—are easily convertible into nouns, though usually with shifted stress, as in *to check úp* contrasted with *a chéckup*. Some such combinations are also used as adjectives, as in *sit-down strike*, *sit-in demonstration*, and *drive-through teller*.

As with the verb-adverb combinations, a shift of stress is sometimes involved when verbs, adjectives, and nouns shift functions—compare *upsét* (verb) and *úpsét* (noun), *prodúce* (verb) and *próduce* (noun), *pérfect* (adjective) and *perféct* (verb). Not all speakers make the functional stress distinction in words like *ally*

and *address*, but many do. Some words whose functions used to be distinguished by shift of stress seem to be losing the distinction. *Perfume* as a noun is now often stressed on the second syllable, and a building contractor regularly *contràcts* to build a house.

COMMON WORDS FROM PROPER NAMES

A large number of common words have come to us from proper names—a kind of functional shift known as **commonization**. The term **eponym** is somewhat confusingly applied either to the word derived from a proper name or to the person who originally bore the name. From names of such eponymous persons, three well-known eponyms are *lynch*, *boycott*, and *sandwich*. *Lynch* (by way of *Lynch's law*) is from the Virginian William Lynch (1742–1820), who led a campaign of “corporeal punishment” against those “unlawful and abandoned wretches” who were harassing the good people of Pittsylvania County, such as “to us shall seem adequate to the crime committed or the damage sustained” (*Dictionary of Americanisms*). *Boycott* is from Charles Cunningham Boycott (1832–97), who, because as a land agent he refused to accept rents at figures fixed by the tenants, was the best-known victim of the policy of ostracizing by the Irish Land League. *Sandwich* is from the fourth Earl of Sandwich (1718–92), said to have spent twenty-four hours at the gaming table with no other refreshment than slices of meat between slices of bread.

The following words are also the unchanged names of actual people: *ampere*, *bowie* (knife), *cardigan*, *chesterfield* (overcoat or sofa), *davenport*, *derby*, *derrick*, *derringer*, *graham* (flour), *guy*, *lavalier*, *macintosh*, *maverick*, *ohm*, *pompadour*, *Pullman*, *shrapnel*, *solon* (legislator), *valentine*, *vandyke* (beard or collar), *watt*, and *zeppelin*. *Bloomer*, usually in the plural, is from Mrs. Amelia Jenks Bloomer (1818–94), who publicized the garb; one could devise no more appropriate name for voluminous drawers than this surname. *Bobby* ‘British policeman’ is from the pet form of the name of Sir Robert Peel, who made certain reforms in the London police system. *Maudlin*, long an English spelling for Old French *Madelaine*, is ultimately from Latin *Magdalen*, that is, Mary Magdalene, whom painters frequently represented as tearfully melancholic.

Comparatively slight spelling modifications occur in *dunce* (from John Duns Scotus [d. ca. 1308], who was in reality anything but a dunce—to his admirers he was *Doctor Subtilis*) and *praline* (from Maréchal Duplessis-Praslin [d. 1675]). *Tawdry* is a clipped form of *Saint Audrey* and first referred to the lace bought at St. Audrey’s Fair in Ely. *Epicure* is an anglicized form of *Epicurus*. *Kaiser* and *czar* are from *Caesar*. *Volt* is a clipped form of the surname of Count Alessandro Volta (d. 1827), and *farad* is derived likewise from the name of Michael Faraday (d. 1867). The name of an early American politician, Elbridge Gerry, is blended with *salamander* in the coinage *gerrymander*. *Pantaloon*, in the plural an old-fashioned name for trousers, is only a slight modification of French *pantalon*, which, in turn, is from Italian *Pantalone*, the name of a silly senile Venetian of early Italian comedy who wore such nether coverings.

The following are derivatives of other personal names: *begonia*, *bougainvillea*, *bowdlerize*, *camellia*, *chauvinism*, *comstockery*, *dahlia*, *jeremiad*, *masochism*,

mesmerism, nicotine, onanism, pasteurize, platonic, poinsettia, sadism, spoonerism, wisteria, zinnia. Derivatives of the names of two writers—*Machiavellian* and *Rabelaisian*—are of such wide application that capitalizing them hardly seems necessary, any more than *platonic*.

The names of the following persons in literature and mythology (if gods, goddesses, and muses may be considered persons) are used unchanged: *atlas, babbitt, caliope, hector, hermaphrodite, mentor, mercury, nemesis, pander, psyche, simon-pure, volcano*. *Benedick*, the name of Shakespeare's bachelor par excellence who finally succumbed to the charms of Beatrice, has undergone only very slight modification in *benedict* ('newly) married man.' *Don Juan, Lothario, Lady Bountiful, Mrs. Grundy, man Friday*, and *Pollyanna*, though written with initial capitals, belong here also.

The following are derivatives of personal names from literature and mythology: *aphrodisiac, bacchanal, herculean, jovial, malapropism, morphine, odyssey, panic, quixotic, saturnine, simony, stentorian, tantalize, terpsichorean, venereal, vulcanize*. Despite their capitals, *Gargantuan* and *Pickwickian* belong here as well.

Some male given names are used generically: *billy* (in *billycock, hillbilly, silly billy*, and alone as the name of a policeman's club), *tom(my)* (in *tomcat, tomtit, tomboy, tommyrot, tomfool*), *john* 'toilet' (compare older *jakes*), *johnny* (in *stage-door Johnny, johnny-on-the-spot*, and perhaps *johnnycake*, though this may come from American Indian *jonikin* 'type of griddlecake' + *cake*), *jack* (in *jackass, cheap-jack, steeplejack, lumberjack, jack-in-the-box, jack-of-all-trades*, and alone as the name of a small metal piece used in a children's game known as *jacks*), *rube* (from *Reuben*), *hick* (from *Richard*), and *toby* 'jug' (from *Tobias*).

Place names have also furnished a good many common words. The following, the last of which exists only in the mind, are unchanged in form: *arras, babel, bourbon, billingsgate, blarney, buncombe, champagne, cheddar, china, cologne, grubstreet, guinea, hamburg* (hat), *java* 'coffee,' *limerick, mackinaw, Madeira, madras, magnesia, meander, morocco, oxford* (shoe or basket-weave cotton shirting), *panama, sauterne, shanghai, shantung, suede* (French name of Sweden), *tabasco, turkey, tuxedo*, and *utopia*.

The following are either derivatives of place names or place names that have different forms from those known to us today: *bayonet, bedlam, calico, canter, cashmere, copper, damascene, damask, damson, denim, frankfurter, gauze, hamburger, italic, jeans* (pants), *laconic, limousine, mayonnaise, milliner, roman* (type), *romance, sardonic, sherry* (see above), *sodomy, spaniel, spartan, stogy, stygian, wiener, worsted*. *Damascene, damask*, and *damson* all three come from *Damascus*. *Canter* is a clipping of *Canterbury* (*gallop*), the easygoing pace of pilgrims to the tomb of St. Thomas à Becket in Canterbury, the most famous and certainly the "realest" of whom are a group of people who never lived at all except in the poetic imagination of Geoffrey Chaucer and everlastingly in the hearts and minds of those who know his *Canterbury Tales*.

Some commercial products become so successful that their brand or trade names achieve widespread use and may pass into common use; e.g., *escalator* and *zipper*. Others maintain their trademark status and so are properly (that is, legally) entitled to capitalization: *Band-Aid, Ping-Pong*, and *Scotch* tape. Sometimes a trade name enters common use through a verb derived from it. In England *to Hoover* is

‘to clean with a vacuum cleaner’ from the name of a famous manufacturer of such vacuums. To photocopy is sometimes called *to xerox*, and a new verb for ‘to search for information on the Internet’ is *to google*. Verbs are not subject to trademarking, though dictionaries are careful to indicate their proper source.

SOURCES OF NEW WORDS

In most cases, we do not know the exact circumstances under which a new word was invented, but there are a few notable exceptions.

Two literary examples are *Catch-22*, from the novel of the same name by Joseph Heller, and *1984*, also from a novel of the same name by George Orwell. *Catch-22* denotes a dilemma in which each alternative is blocked by the other. In the novel, the only way for a combat pilot to get a transfer out of the war zone is to ask for one on the ground that he is insane, but anyone who seeks to be transferred is clearly sane, since only an insane person would want to stay in combat. The rules provide for a transfer, but *Catch-22* prevents one from ever getting it. Orwell’s dystopian novel is set in the year 1984, and its title has come to denote the kind of society the novel depicts—one in which individual freedom has been lost, people are manipulated through cynical television propaganda by the government, and life is a gray and hopeless affair.

Another literary contribution that has come into the language less directly is *quark*. As used in theoretical physics, the term denotes a hypothetical particle, the fundamental building block of all matter, originally thought to be of three kinds. The theory of these threefold fundamental particles was developed by a Nobel Prize winner, Murray Gell-Mann, of the California Institute of Technology; he called them *quarks* and then discovered the word in James Joyce’s novel *Finnegans Wake* in the phrase “Three quarks for Muster Mark!” Doubtless Gell-Mann had seen the word in his earlier readings of the novel, and it had stuck in the back of his mind until he needed a term for his new particles. It is not often that we know so much about the origin of a word in English.

DISTRIBUTION OF NEW WORDS

Which of the various kinds of word making are the most prolific sources of new words today? One study of new words over the fifty-year period 1941–1991 (Algeo and Algeo, *Fifty Years* 14) found that the percentages of new words were as follows for the major types:

Type	Percent
Compounding	40
Affixation	28
Shifting	17
Shortening	8
Blending	5
Borrowing	2
Creating	below 0.5

Other studies have found variable percentages among the types, but there is considerable agreement that nowadays English forms most of its new words by combining morphemes already in the language. Compounding and affixation account for two-thirds of our new words. Most of the others are the result of putting old words to new uses or shortening or blending them. Loanwords borrowed from other languages (considered in the next chapter), although once a frequent source of new words, is of relatively minor importance today. And almost no words are made from scratch.

FOR FURTHER READING

GENERAL

Algeo and Algeo. *Fifty Years among the New Words*.

Ayto. *Twentieth Century Words*.

Bauer. *English Word-formation*.

Cannon. *Historical Change and English Word-Formation*.

Fischer. *Lexical Change in Present-Day English*.

Hughes. *A History of English Words*.

Metcalf. *Predicting New Words*.

WORD FORMATION

Acronyms, Initialisms, & Abbreviations Dictionary.

Adams. *Complex Words in English*.

Freeman. *A New Dictionary of Eponyms*.

SLANG

Allen. *The City in Slang: New York*.

Farmer and Henley. *Dictionary of Slang and Its Analogues*.

Lighter. *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*.

Partridge. *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*.

SPECIAL VOCABULARIES

Allen. *Unkind Words: Ethnic Labeling*.

Friedman. *A "Brand" New Language*.

Poteet and Poteet. *Car & Motorcycle Slang*.